Written by miwashiba

Alicemare

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Alice mare - Chapter Prologue

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Prologue

The ant told me that the frog is bad.
The frog told me that the cat is bad.
The cat told me, “No, the rabbit’s the worst of all!”
So I…

…My ears rang. Yet I could also hear it as a voice, trying to tell me something.

Slumping down in the chair, I looked up. The ceiling began to warp into whiteness. Wanting to check the time, I looked to where the clock should have been, but the numbers were black blots, squirming around like bugs; it wouldn’t tell me anything useful.

I knew this scene well. I could still never forget that day.

“…I will end this,” I muttered to no one in particular, shutting my eyes.

There was no end in sight to the ringing. The voice seemed to get increasingly louder.

“You want to be XXXXed? Then you just need to XXXX.”
“What should I XXXX?”
“Let’s see now… You should XXXX bad people. Then you’ll be XXXXed, too.”

That was what the cat told me. …No, actually, I couldn’t quite remember if it was the cat who said it.

But I always wanted someone to XXXX me. It had been the only thing on my mind for a long time. That’s why I was observing the children at the facility and continuing to

research - in hopes of finding an answer.

“Ah, my head hurts…”

I tried to lift myself up and head for the bed. But instead, I powerlessly fell onto the desk. I tried several times, but the worsening ringing in my ears and headache sapped my will.

“…Oh well,” I mumbled, and lay my head down on the desk.

As I drifted off, amid the clamor of metallic sounds, I felt like I heard her voice.

Alice mare - Chapter 1

Chapter 1: Good Night

1

The long, white hallway went on. Every step echoed for long after I took it.

As this went on unchanging for a while, I felt indescribable anxiety and helplessness. The place I was in earlier, I saw people who looked like workers here and there, but now there were absolutely no signs of life. The total silence only added to my unease.

This town, situated next to a large forest, was a bustling place with lots of people. Fairly large, albeit not enough to be called a city. Compared to the forest, where many families lived modest, meager lives, everyone here lived much more bountifully.

Now I was walking down the hallways of a large hospital built in the center of that town. Last night, my friend who worked here as a doctor gave me a call: “I’ve got a kid here at the hospital I want you to inspect.”

“Hey! Long time no see.”

With a lively shout, someone grabbed my shoulder from behind. I turned around to a man in a white coat with a good-natured, freckled face topped with chestnut hair.

“Glad I got the idea to come looking for you. …So you got lost again, huh?”, asked Cliff - my only friend - with a little smile.

“…I guess I’m just not good at remembering places or directions. Ever since I started living there, I’ve only come to town for… just grocery shopping, I suppose.”

“Sure, but you’ve been living here for way longer, so… Well, yeah, you’ve gotten lost a lot of places ever since we met in college…” Cliff’s forehead wrinkled, and he knit his brows.

“…Anyway, I still can’t get over how you decided to buy that place and live there. There’s always been weird rumors about it. You know? Like it being a mental hospital, or a place for human experimentation… I heard it all.”

“I have you to thank for that. And yes, it’s an odd place. No windows, and one of the rooms does lend itself to those kinds of stories. But I have to say I like it, because people’s reluctance to come near means it’s quiet.”

“When you get right down to it, it’s my fault, huh. …So, what of that room, anyway? You mean the one on the second floor, down the left hall?”, Cliff asked me, showing a bit of hesitation.

“I didn’t even want to so much as clean it up, so I just left it as it was and locked the door.”

His forehead seemed to scrunch up even further at my reply. He gave a little sigh, and we were both silent a while.

“…So, the kid I was telling you about. You know that burglary that happened in town? He’s that couple’s kid. No other siblings, it looks like,” Cliff explained with a bit of gloom.

“…And what happened to his parents when they were attacked?”

Cliff just shook his head silently. When I saw the story on the news, all they said was “The two are in serious condition and are being treated at the hospital.” But his face told me that in the end, they couldn’t save either one.

“First things first, could you try talking with him? I already tried, but… it didn’t go too well.”

He began leading me in the opposite direction of where I’d been heading. Worried for Cliff, who looked so full of grief, I walked in behind.

There had been frequent incidents in this town as of late. While the specifics varied, the suspects and culprits made statements along the lines of “It felt like something took control of me…” Even newspaper and TV reports had begun to focus more on those statements than the actual details of the incident.

On our way to the boy who he said was in the hospital’s care, Cliff told me all he knew.

The burglary had taken place two days ago. The suspect visited a house in a residential district near the library - the Llewellyn residence - and attacked the couple living there, stabbing them repeatedly with a knife. That was the whole story. There was no indication of any money or items being stolen, and no visible motive. All the suspect had to offer was illogical testimony - that he felt like he was possessed, that he heard a voice.

The Llewellyn family had a child, but he was out while the incident was occurring. By the time he returned home and found his mutilated parents, the suspect had already absconded.

Afterward, a neighbor found the boy unconscious outside the front door of the residence. When they ran over in worry, they noticed the tragedy inside and called the police.

“It must’ve been a huge shock. Other than his name, he says he doesn’t remember anything, not even about the incident or his family.”

“Amnesia…?”

Cliff looked to me and nodded, dropping pace slightly. He seemed to notice that I was out of breath. Though I felt pathetic for it, I also slowed down.

“I haven’t told him his parents have passed on yet. It’d confuse him too much as this point. And he doesn’t have any other relatives… You give care and counsel to kids when incidents leave them with nowhere to go, right?”

Leaving a slight pause, I quietly confirmed with a nod.

“This is my second such request, but I hope you’ll accept it… Will you take him to your place? I’ll call if I find any relatives or caretakers for him.”

I put my hand to my forehead and thought deeply.

Currently, I had four children in my care at the facility. As far as finances, adding one more wouldn’t be a big problem. But another object of study would mean more work. I’d have to make my decision based on his condition…

Before I could come to a conclusion, a boy appeared before me, no doubt the one I'd been hearing about. He was politely sitting alone on a sky-blue bench in the hallway.

Blond with a white shirt. With his head lowered, I couldn't tell his expression. Below that, black pants. His suspenders and long blue-and-white striped socks stood out the most.

His gaze wasn't directed at me, but deep into the pages of a thick book on his lap. His large eyes went left to right, again and again. He seemed engrossed in reading. I watched him for a while, yet he showed no notice of my presence.

I went around to his front. After getting down on my knees to be at the same eye level, the boy finally lifted his face. He was slightly pale, and looked at me with concern. I hadn't been able to see before, but it seemed a little bit of life had left his clear blue eyes.

I'd had a hunch, but… He was on the verge of emergence.

I took a breath to conceal my utmost surprise. Then I put my hand to my chest and smiled lightly.

"Hello," I greeted the boy.

2

There was the sound of running water. In this situation, I couldn't stand the unease of being in silence.

…What were my mother and father's faces like? How old were they? Did they get mad easily? What kind of house did we live in? …What was I doing then?

Even the smallest thing would have helped. I desperately went looking for something I might remember, but I found nothing. All it got me was emptiness and a sense of loss, like I was trying to catch a cloud in the sky.

I took a deep breath and looked at the person in front of me. He was kind of short, with slightly frizzy hair. Blue eyes. I gave him my right hand, and he gave his left in response. So, apparently, this person in the mirror was me.

At the same time I felt a sense of comfort that I was alive, I felt anxious about my lack of conviction that the person in the mirror was me.

"Allen Llewellyn…"

I mumbled my own name. It was the only clear memory I had when I came to.

I woke up in a hospital bed. I couldn’t remember what happened before as much as I tried. I asked the policeman and the brown-haired doctor all sorts of things about my family, my mom, my dad, but the only thing I could get an answer about was my name.

I twisted the knob to stop the faucet, and the sound stopped with a squeak. I left the bathroom, and decided to return to where I’d been before.

I went back to the bench I’d been sitting on. The brown-haired doctor had told me to wait there, as there was someone he wanted me to meet, but I saw no sign of him after that.

Even after taking a brief trip to the bathroom since I was getting tired of sitting, there were still no sounds but my own footsteps and breathing as I walked down the hall. Still going to be a little while, I thought.

I plopped down on the bench with some force. It was very comfortable. After repeatedly feeling it with my hands and enjoying its touch, I picked up a book on the end of the seat.

It had a red cover with a blue spiral. Given that my name was on the binding and it was worn in places, I could tell it was something I’d read again and again.

I had a gut feeling that I read books for fun. At any rate, I didn’t have to think about myself when I was reading, so I would open a book and read when I was alone.

I turned the pages, full of short poems and cute illustrations. Maybe something will jog my memory, I thought, reading through.

I wonder how long I spent doing that. I noticed a shadow before me and looked up with a start. But probably because my neck was stiff from reading, the action was much slower in actuality.

He stared at me with eyes like marbles, long, black, unkempt hair tied up behind him. At the end of a brown cord hanging from his neck was a glittering gold locket. I hadn’t noticed him at all, and I couldn’t hide my surprise at his sudden appearance.

“Hello.”

With a gentle greeting, the person in front of me proved himself to be a living person - a grown man. I then noticed the brown-haired doctor behind the man, looking this way with concern.

My head spun, not sure of the situation. Noticing this, the man also took on a worried expression.

“…Are you okay? You look rather pale.”

“…I’m… fine,” I replied quietly enough that I wasn’t sure if he would even hear it.

“I see… That’s good.”

He smiled, relieved I said so. I was relieved too that he heard me. It also occurred to me that this man had a very childish smile.

“He told me you have amnesia. That can’t be easy. And it’d be hard to stay here all by yourself too, wouldn’t it? There are other children much like you at my place. Would you like to live with us there? Just for as long as you need to.”

This sudden invitation surprised me. Someone I’d only just met was asking if I’d live with him. I couldn’t figure out how to reply, as I really couldn’t decide if it was alright to simply answer yes.

Noticing my concern, the brown-haired doctor gave the man some much-needed assistance. “I don’t think it’d be very interesting for you, sticking around here. I asked him to come because I figured you might prefer talking to kids your age more than somebody like me. And don’t judge the book by its cover - you can trust him.”

The man in front of me gave the doctor a look of “Well, aren’t you rude,” but once he noticed I was looking, he smiled bitterly with a furrowed brow.

Yes, there wasn’t much more I could do here than sit in bed and read. Here I was talking to all these adults I didn’t know, but it seemed like it would be a lot easier for me to talk to kids I didn’t know.

Though some doubt remained, I decided to go to the man’s facility. He seemed to smile a little bit when I told him so.

We left the center of the town and drove through the forest. Occasionally, the car would bump slightly with the sound of branches snapping underneath. It moved at a very leisurely speed.

After twenty or so minutes driving, we came to a stop in front of a musty old building.

“We’re here. Sorry that took so long. I don’t drive very often…”, the man apologized, scratching the back of his head. For whatever reason, there were small beads of sweat on his forehead.

I shook my head to say it was no bother, unbuckled my seatbelt and exited the car. It was

the end of summer, but the heat seemed to have no intention of dying down. To get away from the strong rays, he and I entered the brown-walled, black-roofed facility.

It was much cleaner inside than the musty exterior suggested. The floor was brightly-colored, the walls white, and the ceiling high. Even the hallways felt relatively wide.

As I took a look around, he called “this way” and beckoned to me. So I proceeded the way he guided.

“This here is my room. I’ll generally always be here, except on special occasions.” He opened the door in front of us and guided me into the room.

Right as I entered, I noticed a large quantity of books and stacks of paper. There was a big mess of both piled on a desk in the corner.

The man grabbed a chair near the desk and brought it to me. “Here.” I sat down, and it made a shrill creaking.

“Don’t worry. It’s certainly old, but the legs won’t give out or anything,” he said with a slightly pained smile. …He must have noticed my hesitation.

“Oh, I didn’t ask your name…”, the man remarked, as he sat in another chair which had also seen a lot of wear.

“Um, Allen. …Allen Llewellyn,” I answered, speaking slowly to confirm it for myself.

“I see. Allen. There are some little promises you have to keep to if you’re going to be living here. Oh, but nothing complicated, nothing strict. …Is that okay?”

I nodded.

“Thank you. Number one, we have fixed times for eating, studying, and sleeping here. But of course, the rest of the time is free time. You can go out as far as the garden outside, and there’s a library on the second floor that you can use as you like.”

“A library…” So I could read whenever I wanted? I wondered how many books they had.

“You can take books to your own room, too. Just be sure to sleep when it’s time to sleep.”

He smiled. …Issuing a warning, huh.

“And while books are fine, don’t take things from the storeroom or other people’s rooms. Oh, and don’t break anything. If you do, you have to tell me.”

I kept nodding in agreement as he went on.

“Don’t try to open up any locked rooms. Don’t hit anyone. And if you have any problems or you want me to get something, tell me. …That’s all. Can you do that?”

“Okay,” I quietly answered.

“Good. I’ve put all that in this note in case you forget. Put it up on the wall of your room, okay?”

He handed me a note with everything he’d said written neatly in large letters. Below the final “promise” was a drawing of a strange, round, fuzzy creature with ears awkwardly jutting out of it.

“Ahaha… it’s a rabbit. …Art is hard.”

After being told so, I looked at the mysterious creature again. Knowing what it was supposed to be, I had to say it had… some resemblance to a rabbit. Staring hard enough, I could convince myself that it truly was a rabbit.

…Maybe I was more fatigued than I realized after the events of the past few days.

“So that’s roughly how life will be for you here. If you’re not sure of anything, you can come ask me. In addition… Here.”

Interrupting my battle with the enigmatic rabbit-esque creature, the man handed me a small, sky-blue notebook.

“Your own personal notebook. I give one to all the children here. Use it however you like. For sad or for happy times. Just write down any feeling you have and show it to me.”

“…It doesn’t have to be words?”

“Haha,” he chuckled. “Yes, one of the children just likes to draw in it. That’s fine by me, too.”

“I see…” I flipped through the notebook. Blank page after blank page, each lined with a gray border.

“Uh, there was something I wanted to… Oh, right. What’s your name…?”

He seemed slightly disconcerted. “Oh, I didn’t introduce myself, did I? Sorry. You can just call me Teacher.”

…Was that a name? It seemed like more of a position to me. But if Teacher was the only adult here, then I guess that wouldn’t be a problem.

“Was my name all you wanted to ask about?”

“No, um… It’s not.” I looked toward the door left slightly ajar.

“Teacher… someone’s been standing out there staring at us for a while.”

Teacher followed my gaze, then got up with some kind of realization. He approached the door and flung it open. There were four children there. They all appeared to be about my age.

The lone boy muttered “yikes” and tried to flee at once, but Teacher quickly caught him. The remaining three were all girls.

“I told you to stay in your rooms until we were done talking, you know,” Teacher sighed, like he was appalled.

“Telling us not to come see makes us wanna come see. Right?”, the silver-haired boy asked the others, standing up tall.

A girl who had white hair with reddish-purple highlights answered the question. “Yeah! I mean, of course we’ll be curious. It’s exciting hearing there’s a new kid coming!”

Behind her, a brown-haired girl looked our way hesitantly. When I looked back at her, she shook with surprise and hid behind the black-haired girl beside her. The black-haired girl silently stared back at me in her place.

…I wondered if I’d done something to upset her. I was already getting worried about how things would fare.

Teacher clapped his hands together to get our attention.

“Very well. It’s almost dinner time, so how about you tell Allen about yourselves here until it’s ready?”

“Man, that sounds annoying,” the silver-haired boy pouted.

“You’re the older ones, you know. You’re Allen’s big brother, and you three are his big sisters. So I’m leaving him in your care,” Teacher told the boy with a smile. The boy looked somewhat satisfied and smirked. …He must be easy to handle, I thought.

“I’ll come call for you when dinner’s ready,” Teacher said, and left the room.

The remaining children and I sat on the floor in the middle of the room. The four sat around me, scrutinizing my face, pulling the cuffs of my clothes. I let them sate their curiosity without resistance.

“Oh yeah, I didn’t introduce myself. Uh, you’re Allen, right?”

Startled by the sudden question, I turned to the voice. It was that silver-haired boy who had been standing out the most. He wore a black knit hat with a silver chain on it. Underneath his slightly scruffy silver hair were olive eyes that seemed to be scheming something. He wore dark bluish-green clothes with silver lines.

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m Allen.”
“Okay! I’m Marcus. Nice to meetcha, Allen!”
“…N-No. Um… Allen. This boy is Joshua.”

The brown-haired girl who had been hiding behind the black-haired one interrupted the boy as he reached out for a handshake. Her hair was tied toward the bottom with two circular red hairclips on each side. She wore a red poncho and a puffy balloon skirt, the front of which was covered by a frilly white apron. Her general appearance brought to mind the fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood.

“What the heck! Chelsy, you spoiled it way too soon. You’re way too serious sometimes. Uh, what’s it called… Yeah, you gotta cool it!”

Joshua pinched the ear of the girl he called Chelsy. She gave a little yelp - maybe she was ticklish - and as her cheeks went red, she retreated behind the black-haired girl again.

“Oh, you didn’t introduce yourself to Allen yet. Uh, yeah, the one in red’s Chelsy. She’s suuuper shy. Always hiding behind people like, y’know, that.”

Shy or not, that was definitely Joshua to blame… I checked on Chelsy. As I was wondering if she’d be okay, someone forcefully grabbed both my hands.

“Um, Allen! I’m Allen! Oh, uh, no! Er, Allen!”

“Whoa… H-Hold on… Calm down, now…” But the girl started swinging her arms up and down, as if trying to reflect my words back at me.

She had white hair swept in a loose wave, with purplish-red highlights slightly darker than her eyes. A small black hat with purple artificial flowers was placed atop her head. She was waving her arms around too much to be sure, but the things flailing about them were probably ribbons. What stood out most in my shaking vision was her checkered skirt.

“Oh, sorry! I’m so happy, I just got really excited. Um… My name’s Letty! There’s also a boy named Rick, but he’s saying good night now, so you can’t meet him. Once he says good morning, I’ll tell him to say hi to you, Allen!”

Once she was done with her rapid-fire speech, Letty’s arms came to a stop. While she didn’t seem to have broken a sweat, I was struggling to catch my breath after her intense

workout. My arms felt numb. …Did I have that little stamina?

Seeing my lack of vigor, Letty asked “Is everything okay?” with concern. No, that’s not what the issue is… But I was so far gone I couldn’t even voice that.

I looked around for someone to help me, and met eyes with one of the girls. Long, clean black hair. A white headdress with wine-red ribbons. A black one-piece with a curious design. But above all, the sharp red glint in her eyes struck me as a little terrifying.

I didn’t know this girl’s name yet, I realized. Thus, I wanted to talk to her, but I hesitated slightly. Come to think of it, she hasn’t said a word yet. And it kind of looks like she’s glaring at me. …Maybe she doesn’t like me.

Noticing my plight, Joshua slapped me on the back.

“Oh, she doesn’t talk much. Especially not introductions - even I couldn’t get a word out of her. So it’s fine! Alright?”

He seemed to be consoling me. Meanwhile, the girl’s cold expression didn’t change one bit. Maybe she wasn’t good at expressing her emotions. I just had to ask Joshua, then.

“…What’s her name?”
“Oh, she’s S…”
“…Stella.”

I turned to the voice in surprise. It seemed to have come from the girl… Stella, herself.

“Uh… Stella, did you just talk?”, Joshua timidly asked, but she ignored that question, and only said,

“…How strange.”

And then her mouth closed again.

Joshua rubbed his neck curiously, then folded his arms and looked at me.

“Well, anyway. You don’t know anything about, like, where anything is here, right?”

I shook my head.

“Alright. I’ll show you what places are okay to go in and what ones aren’t. Okay, so first…”

Joshua motioned for me to follow, so I did, and he gave me a simple run-down of the facility. Once he was done showing me around, Teacher returned to get us, and we headed to the dining room for dinner.

A few months passed after I began living with Teacher and the other children. In living with and talking to the others, I came to know all about them.

Letty was a very energetic girl. So, so energetic that she often pushed you around. As for the boy she mentioned on the first day, Rick, I was able to meet him during free time that night while on my way to borrow a book from the library. His white hair with purple-red highlights was much like Letty's, but tied together in the back, and he wore pants with small ribbons on them. He was the spitting image of Letty; I figured they might have been twins.

We didn't talk much that day, but his personality immediately seemed very different from Letty's: he was calm, and gave the impression of never getting too excited about anything. I went looking for Rick the next day to talk to him some more, but I couldn't find him. All Letty had to tell me was that he was "saying good night." I saw Rick many times after that during free time at night and talked to him then, but I was still wondering about what Letty said.

Chelsy was a somewhat cowardly but very kind girl, who always showed concern for those around her. It seemed that Chelsy might have been better at folding laundry and cleaning than Teacher was. She wasn't one for running around outside, so typically I only saw her go outside the facility to water plants in the garden.

She kept an unnerving amount of teddy bears in her room, and my legs almost gave out when I first went in and saw them. But girls like stuffed animals, so that probably explained it for Chelsy too.

Joshua was a prank-loving boy. He would often catch frogs and bugs in the garden and show them to Teacher and the other children, or worse, startle them by quietly placing them on their shoulders. He'd already done it to me many times. Despite his mischievous image, he always washed his clothes if they got dirty, and neatly put away toys when he was done playing with them. Surprisingly, he really had his head on straight in that respect.

He was also very talkative, and it was hard to tell if the things he was saying were true or not. Since Joshua and Rick were the only other boys, and I only saw Rick on occasion, I usually ended up hanging out with Joshua whenever I wasn't reading.

Stella was still a girl riddled with mystery. She would respond if you asked her something, but she'd never talk any more than that, and would absolutely never start a conversation herself.

Although, every time we passed each other, it seemed like she was glaring at me. …She probably didn't like me. On occasion, I heard her playing piano in her room. One time, I

put my ear against her door to hear it more clearly, but she found me and gave me an extra-piercing glare.

Teacher was lacking in some areas, and it was… hard to call him a dependable adult. But he was very polite with us, and I could tell he was always looking out for us. According to Mr. Cliff, who occasionally came to visit, he was supposedly a highly intelligent person, but it was hard to see it that way when he was getting pranked by Joshua or being dragged around by Letty. Then again, the documents and papers in Teacher's room all seemed very complex. …Was he doing research of some kind?

Once he got deep into thought, it was hard to get him to notice you. Joshua told me "That's when you hit him in the flank!" and demonstrated, and the results were startling. So, weak point: flank.

"…Oops, I wrote that down…"

I was only trying to gather my thoughts, but I'd been unknowingly writing it all in the notebook in front of me. The sky-blue notebook I hadn't shown to Teacher at all since the day I got it. I was told I could write anything, but I was writing nothing.

There had been no progress as far as my memories. But the whole time, I felt like I was missing something. Like I was forgetting something important… But since I couldn't remember what it was, it was just fuzzy. And so another season passed.

"…Time for bed."

It was still a little while until official bed time, but I changed into my pajamas and sunk into bed. The fluffy pillow and blanket smelled nostalgic somehow. Was the blanket at my house like this?, I found myself thinking again. Every time I had such thoughts, my head ached a little, and I felt very empty.

Maybe I'll be empty like this forever…

To run from the slowly-growing headache… I fell into a deep sleep.

"…I know the thing you want to know."
"…Really?"
"Yes, but there's someone else who knows it too."

An unknown voice. My vision is black, I can't see anything - but someone is there.

"Who would that be?"
"Well, how many billion lifeforms exist in the world at this moment?"
"…Who are you?"

“That isn’t what you want to know, is it?”

A girl’s voice. We aren’t carrying much of a conversation.

“I’ll give you a hint. …You’ll have to remember the answer yourself.”

Remember. Can I remember? …Surely not. I can’t remember anything.

“…Oh. Your hands are shaking.”

I feel warmth in my hands which I realize were cold before. The girl holds them fully in her own.

“There there, there there, there, there… It’s okay.”

The girl scoops up that which is pouring out of me. My hands have stopped shaking.

“Don’t worry. You’ll remember all of it. You don’t need to rush. They didn’t vanish - they were only taken. …There’s still XXXX left in you.”

“XXXX…?”

I repeat the word the girl spoke. But the word becomes fuzzy, like it’s covered by static. Yet I know it. I know this word… its existence?

…Only taken?

“It is…”

Bang!

With a dull sound, pain echoed through my body. Looks like I fell out of bed. I sat up rubbing my head, which was still hazy.

“XXXX…”

Just like in the dream, the word wasn’t clear. Just after saying it, I got a terrible headache and collapsed on the bed. I felt like I was in the rift between dream and reality.

I’d been having similar dreams lately. Dreams of someone coming to talk to me and console me. Who was the girl appearing in them? She seemed to have held my hands. I touched them; the heat still remained on them. …No, not just my hands. My whole body seemed warm and languid.

“…Achoo!”

My head was more dazed than before. I tried to lift my body again, but I couldn’t get the energy, and collapsed back on the bed.

While worrying about what to do, I fell back asleep.

“…A slight fever. Maybe it’s because of the changing season? I think it’ll be fine if you just rest.”

“…Sorry, Teacher.”

I wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but Teacher shook me awake. After that, he brought me hot milk, and I took a sip. It was a little too hot.

“It’s not a particularly high fever, but since you can’t move, I’ll make some soup and bring it to you. Is there anything else you want?”, Teacher asked with a smile.

If I said I wanted to read a book, he’d probably be upset… But before I could even think about how to reply, there was already a word out of my mouth.

“…XXXX.”

It took me a few seconds to realize what I’d said. I looked to Teacher, and he looked at me like he’d been splashed with cold water.

Oh no. It just sounded like static to me, so I wasn’t thinking about it, but maybe that word had some strange meaning. I quickly lowered my head with embarrassment.

“…Oh dear. That, I can’t give you. And it’s not something you can buy. …Sorry. I’ll keep it in mind.”

When I looked up, I saw Teacher smiling with a bit of sadness on his face. I had the same thought when I first met him, but he really had very childlike expressions.

“Well… Maybe I’ll just buy some new books again, then. I was planning to go shopping in town this afternoon.”

The words “new books” made my heart quiver a little. I had faint recollections of all the books in the library, and there were no others that suited my tastes. So having more books I could read made me very happy.

“You like to read, don’t you, Allen? I’m really impressed by how many difficult words you know already,” Teacher praised with admiration.

“…You read difficult books too, Teacher. There’s a lot of them in your room.”

“Ahaha… Well, Teacher’s not so smart. So I have to read that many just to understand anything.”

He lowered his head slightly with a lonesome look. Then he put a hand to his mouth, and fell silent.

“Teacher?”

He didn’t respond. I waved a hand in front of his eyes, but no change in the situation. … Deep in thought again, I supposed. It’d be a while until he came back to us.

Teacher would suddenly go quiet like this not only when he was alone, but even in the middle of conversations with us. He was up late every night researching things, but I always wondered what. He was a very kind person… but I really didn’t know anything more than that.

“Allen, if I told you there was a World unlike our world… Would you believe me?”

Teacher was again looking into my eyes.

“Huh? …What do you mean?”, I asked back, confused by the offbeat question. What did he mean by “World”?

“…No, it’s just a fairy tale. Sorry to bring it up,” he hurriedly replied.

“But… should you be invited to that door, I’d advise against opening it.”

With that, he checked my temperature again, then left the room. As Teacher closed the door, I thought I heard him say, “Just a little more.”

When I next woke up, I was feeling much better. Maybe it was thanks to Teacher’s frequent attending to me. I had the chicken soup and sandwich left on my desk and drank the cold remedy beside them. After that, I changed out of my pajamas.

As I opened the door to leave the room, I heard a small yelp and an impact on my body. A girl was lying on her bottom in front of me, her eyes dazed.

“Are you okay, Chelsy?”

I held out my hand, and her face burned up at once. But she timidly grabbed it and slowly got up.

“Th, thank you. Um, I-I’m sorry…”, Chelsy said with her face lowered in embarrassment, her voice half-vanishing. Even though we’d known each other a while now, she still kept her distance when we talked.

Wondering if maybe she was scared of my face, I tried smiling at Chelsy. That made her eyes bulge, and she twisted her neck in confusion. …Maybe I’d forgotten how to put on expressions properly.

“U-Umm. Teacher said you seemed to be doing much better, and it was okay to talk with you. And, uh, I was kind of anxious about…”

Her voice got quieter and increasingly more mumbly. I couldn’t really make out what she said toward the end, but it seemed like she’d been worried about me, at any rate.

“…Thanks. I’m fine now,” I said to Chelsy, looking her right in the eye. She hurried to do the same and nodded a tiny bit. Considering that she wouldn’t make eye contact at all at first, maybe we were gradually getting more friendly. …Still keeping a pretty big distance, though.

Just then, I heard a creaking of some kind from the ceiling. Chelsy shrieked a little, and I fell on my behind with surprise at her scream. She promptly reached out to grab my hand, but tripped and fell in the process.

“…What are you doing?”

The door of the room next to mine cracked open, and Rick stared at us through the gap dubiously. I explained the situation, and he wordlessly grabbed our hands and lifted Chelsy and I up.

“Letty told me I should stay away from Allen because he has a cold, but you look okay now to me,” Rick said, and stroked my head.

“Why were you startled by a sound, anyway? The floor here squeaks all the time… It should be a common occurrence.”

Rick put his weight on one leg, and the wood floor made a strained sound like it might crumble at any moment. Getting uneasy, I quickly told him “that’s enough” and grabbed his arm.

“Um… Joshua said something. He said there’s been voices, coming from the second floor lately. So… maybe… I thought it might be… a ghost, or…” Chelsy’s face rapidly paled.

“…Joshua tells lies like that all the time. You’re too honest, Chelsy. It’s not like you’ve seen it for yourself, so…”

Rick sighed and put a hand on Chelsy's shoulder. Another one of Joshua's tall tales, I thought - but this one had my interest.

"…What kind of voices, I wonder? Girls' voices? Old guys' voices?"

"What, you too, Allen?" Rick seemed appalled. "…If you're honestly curious, ask Joshua. He should be in his room."

Chelsy yawned, and the two of them said good night to me and returned to their rooms. I went to Joshua's to ask him about the voices on the second floor.

"Huh, didn't you have a cold? You better already?"

As I was about to knock on the door, Joshua came out just on cue. Perfect. I decided to ask him about the voices Chelsy mentioned.

"Oh, that! Yeah, voices are coming from the storeroom lately. All like, "heeelp." Which definitely means ghosts!"

For added flair, he raised both hands threateningly like he was about to attack me. But I guess my reaction was pretty meager, as he looked a little embarrassed and slowly put his hands down.

"Have you gone to check what it is, Joshua?"

"Huh? Ugh, no way. I don't wanna do that myself. Hey, not 'cause I'm scared! Just because I think that stuff's stupid!"

So Joshua said, but his legs were shaking a little. Maybe this time he was telling the truth. I just said "Got it," and headed toward the stairs to the second floor.

"Hey, Allen, it's bed time! Make sure Teacher doesn't catch you! And if he does, don't tell him I said anything!", Joshua shouted from behind. But I only heard him faintly, more interested in the voices upstairs.

As I left the hallway to go up the stairs, I heard someone coming down them. Not good - was it Teacher? I stepped back and took a peek. It wasn't Teacher coming downstairs, but Stella. There were a few books in her hands.

"…"

…The silence was heavy. Stella stared intensely at me. I found myself backing away. And she stepped closer to me as if refusing to let the distance between us widen.

"…Yes, you're very strange. Because… you can speak."

A soft, transient voice grazed my ears. I felt like I hadn't heard her voice in forever.

"Probably because you don't really feel like you're alive. It's the case with everyone here, but you most of all."

…Was that a compliment? I puzzled over how to respond to that.

"No… Actually, you're slightly different." Ignoring me, she nodded with some kind of understanding. "…If you're looking for Teacher, he's not on the second floor. But you should finish any business you have quickly."

Hearing her talk like she could see right through me made my heart pound a little. …She might have been scarier than any ghost. Once she'd passed by me and I was sure she was out of sight, I went upstairs, careful not to make a sound.

It was already very dark on the second floor, and very silent. I felt around to find the storeroom door and nervously turned the knob. It wasn't locked.

The door opened with a creak. The room was dark and a little dusty.

I took a few steps forward and strained my ears. Other than what seemed to be a draft, I didn't hear anything. Maybe it was just a tall tale after all. A little let down, I impulsively sighed. Just as I turned to go back to my room…

"…e…"

"Huh?" …Did I hear something?

"…p me…"

Something was there. But I could only hear the voice, and couldn't be sure what it was. I fumbled around to get closer to the voice. My heartbeat got steadily louder.

"…Help me…"

I finally got right up to the source of the voice. I couldn't see it clearly in the dim lighting, but I seemed to be right next to a model of a butterfly.

Before I could even think, I tried to touch the butterfly. It was placed high up, so I stretched to reach it. Still too far away, I got on my tiptoes, and my legs trembled. Just as I finally grabbed it, it slipped out of my hand.

Crash!

The butterfly model fell to my feet and shattered with a loud sound. Startled, I lept backward. …Bad. Really bad. I was turning pale, I knew. My heartbeat got louder still.

And on top of that, I thought I heard laughter behind me.

3

…I had a terrible headache. Maybe I'd caught Allen's cold. No, I knew better than anyone that wasn't the reason. I was just approaching my limits again. I felt a familiar dizziness.

"…Yes, I need to check that all the doors are locked again. I know the library's isn't since Stella was there…"

I slowly lifted myself. Things hadn't worsened enough yet that I couldn't walk.

Crash!

I heard something breaking upstairs. It was past bed time, but was someone still upstairs? It sounded like it came from the storeroom, but that was almost always locked…

…No, never mind that. I just need to see who it is. I hurried up and opened the storeroom door.

"Who's there?!"

I turned on the lights to reveal a pale-faced Allen. Glass shards and a butterfly model were scattered at his feet.

Allen's body shook as he stared my way. Seeing the situation, I approached cautiously to avoid making him any more scared.

I kneeled down to his level and spoke softly. "…I heard a loud crash. What were you doing up here? I told you not to leave your room during bed time, didn't I?"

Looking very ashamed, he mumbled, very quietly,

"…The butterfly… said "help me.""

…The butterfly spoke?

"…I see. Well, while that butterfly may be pretty enough to look alive, it's long since died. Something without a soul can't speak, can it?"

My chest tightened from what I said. I was still tied down by the regret of that day.

"The model is all busted…", Allen said, about to sob, and turned his eyes away and down.

I took Allen's hand, and confirming that he didn't have a scratch on him, felt relieved. His

hand was still shaking. …Maybe I spoke too harshly.

“…You don’t seem hurt. That’s good. These glass shards are dangerous. I’ll clean them up, so go to your room and sleep.”

“I’m sorry…”, he quietly repeated again and again. Oh, this wasn’t good. This was dangerous.

“No need to apologize, really. Just don’t do it again. There there, there there, there, there… It’s okay.”

I gently held Allen’s hands and recited my charm. He looked back at me with wide eyes. Did I say something unusual?

…At any rate, I stood up to get him out of the room, when suddenly there was a shrill sound in my ears.

“Is it reeeally okay?”

“…!”

I heard a voice from somewhere. An unpleasant voice I knew well.

“Are you okay, Teacher?”

I looked up in surprise. Allen was looking at me worriedly. “I’m fine,” I insisted, and led him out.

Once I’d seen him go down the stairs, I responded to the voice without turning around. “…You were watching?”

“Boy, you look like you swallowed somethin’ sour! Was hopin’ for a bit of a better reception after all this time.”

I felt something coiling on my back. I was more and more discomforted.

“You’ve known for ages, haven’tcha? Now, what’s it gonna be?”

A distinctive laugh made my skin crawl. I turned around and spoke to the source of the voice.

“…I have a favor to ask you.”

4

All the lights were out on the first floor, giving it an ominous air. I followed the walls back

to my room.

“There there…”

Why did Teacher say the same charm the girl did in my dream? And what was that voice calling for help, anyway? Lots of questions floated around in my head unanswered.

“…I’m sleepy.”

Even thought I’d slept soundly all day, I felt intensely drowsy. I went to the closet to change into my pajamas and put a hand on the door.

“Meow.”

“…?”

Something black was by my feet. I couldn’t see it clearly in the darkness.

“Meooow,” it said with a cat-like voice. But something about it seemed unlike a cat. What was that about? It rubbed its face against my leg and put a paw on the closet door.

“You want to go inside?”, I asked, knowing it wouldn’t actually be able to talk back.

“…Won’t you open it, Alice?”

I jumped and looked around for who said that. I checked again and again, but there was no one around the room but me and the cat at my feet. Did the cat speak…?

“Don’t act so surprised. You read stories with talkin’ worms and mice, don’t you?”

One of its golden eyes gleamed in the dark. Its jagged white teeth raised high enough to nearly reach where its ears would be.

“…Stories are different from reality.”

“Oho! Then what if you’re in a dream?”

In a dream? Then sure, I could see the kind of things I’d see in stories, and have strange experiences. But did that explain what was happening now? Maybe I was already dreaming, hence talking to a cat?

“Not to worry. You always wake up from dreams. And whether somethin’ wakes you up, or you tear it apart yourself, that’s all down to what happens in the dream! So what’ll it be, Alice?”

Was this cat I’d been talking to referring to me when he said “Alice”? Didn’t the real

“Alice” chase after a white rabbit and fall down its rabbit hole? But my invitation to Wonderland was coming from a cat with one eye creepily floating in the darkness, and this was a closet, not a rabbit hole. …I couldn’t make sense of it, and it spun around in my head.

The cat started clawing at the closet to hurry me up. There was a door to a World of dreams in front of me.

After a slight hesitation, I opened the door with both hands.

“The front cover is open! Welcome, Alice. Time for a fun dream to begin!”

…Deep in my ears, there were many metallic sounds overlapping each other. My body felt weightless, like I was thrown into zero-gravity. My eyelids were heavy, and felt sewn shut; I couldn’t open them.

…Where was this? I tried to move my limbs, but it was futile.

“…”

I thought I heard someone speak. But it was drowned out by an unpleasant buzzing.

Something warm touched my chest. And the warmth dragged me along…

“…Huh?”

When I woke up, I was lying in bed. …Did I fall asleep after that? I crawled out of the covers and put my feet on the floor. I was still wearing my shoes.

I stood up and looked around. This wasn’t my room. …So where was it? My head was hazy, and I couldn’t think for too long.

The drab wooden floor had fallen through in places, and if there was anything below, it was enshrouded in thick darkness. There weren’t any walls or anything, only a path.

I proceeded along it, careful of the holes. It all looked the same, so I became worried whether I was actually getting anywhere.

After walking a while, I saw a human figure. …No, upon closer inspection, his lower half was decidedly not human. He wore something like a cape with a hood, and down below, a long tail flitted around. I nervously approached, and the figure’s eyes darted toward me.

“Jesus! What the hey?! Now if this isn’t a strange little human I’ve never seen before!”

He peered at me with a repulsive grin. His body, like a human body with cat parts stuck on, staggered around in front of me. The shape of his head was obscured by the hood.

“What’s up? Anything’s on your mind, I can answer, Alice!”

Upon him saying “Alice,” I retraced my memory. Come to think of it, he resembled that cat who had tempted me to open the closet door. The single eye floating in his hood was one with the cat’s singular eye in my mind. So was I in a dream like the cat had said?

“Yes indeedy!”, the cat-like creature responded clownishly to my unspoken question. “If you say you’re dreaming, Alice, then this is a dream. Because here, everything depends on what Alice says and does!”

“I’m not Alice. I have a name, it’s Allen,” I retorted, keeping in my irritation. Maybe I felt some fear of even that one thing I had left being changed into something else.

“Not your name, huh? Oh, no no, Alice is Alice. And that’s because I say so!”

My head reeled.

“That contradicts what I just said? Maybe you’re onto something, kid. This place is chock full of weirdos, so I’m just one of ‘em. Mweeheeheehee!”

He went on egotistically answering questions I wasn’t asking. I judged at this point that I wouldn’t be getting along with this denizen of my dream.

“Oh, don’t say that. You don’t wanna stop in the middle of a good meal, do ya? Same for dreams. This World’s only just been made. You gotta savor the taste.”

His gold eye narrowed, and he smirked. …Disgusting.

“Oop! Well, I’m busier than I look. Alright, I’ll smell ya!

The cat-like creature decided it was time to part ways, and vanished just as he turned his body. What was that all about? I started back on the path in front of me to get away from my surmounting unease.

After traveling a little ways, I reached a large plaza-like area. It was surrounded with iron bars, and the floor was paved with cracked stones. Numerous objects that looked like graves were placed around.

In the center was a figure different from the cat. It had strange hair that parted oddly into tree branches. Rabbit-like ears grew out of its head, but one of them was torn up, like a monster had bitten it off.

The rabbit-like creature beckoned to me to come closer once it noticed my presence. The whites of its eyes were stained black, and pupils like red moons floated in the center. They frightened me, and I pondered whether I should go over there.

”…Would you hurry it up?“, he said, annoyed. So he can talk, too. He was only getting more impatient as I thought, so I hurried over.

“Sigh… You’re the sixth one, and my fifth explanation. What a pain. And after all my insisting that they come in groups…”

He murmured complaints seemingly not to anyone but himself. His skin was extremely white, and didn’t feel alive. While he did have a rabbit-like tail, I feared he would probably kill me if I tried to touch it right now.

“Ah… Sorry. You caught me at a bad time.” The deadly anger quickly vanishing from his face, he shuffled his posture and cleared his throat.

“Good evening, Alice, and welcome. You’ve done well. I’m the White Rabbit, a guide of this World. It’s a rather big place, so call me if you need anything.” The White Rabbit seemed quite familiar with this spiel.

“…Though I should note, I won’t move from this spot. It’s just a pain, really. So to enter the Worlds, you’ll have to… Hm? Those numbers don’t add up. Why is that…?”

Was there a problem? The White Rabbit began to worry. But a short time later, he found even that action to be too much trouble and took a breath.

“…Well, all right. You see, rather troublingly, I’ve lost the keys to the World doors. Of the five, four have been stolen by a certain individual. …And I think I can hazard a guess as to who.”

His forehead wrinkled like he’d suddenly acquired a pounding headache. His earlier gentle expression once again changed to one full of bloodlust.

“As previously stated, I don’t want to move an inch. So, Alice, I’d like to ask you to recover them. …How does that sound?”

He glared at me, unwilling to take no for an answer. This was an entirely different beast from the White Rabbit I knew.

“…Well, I’ll make you do it whether you like it or not. Luckily, I do have one of the World keys on hand, so you can already go in one. Knowing who we’re dealing with, I’m sure he’s scattered them all across the Worlds. You’re likely to find them just wandering around.”

The White Rabbit continued explaining without breaking for a reply. What was with these people? They all acted like the world revolved around them.

“…Don’t be shy about asking any other questions you may have,” he added like an afterthought, seeing my concern. “But I’ll only answer up to three.”

…Would he actually answer them? There was a lot I still hadn’t put together, but for now I asked a question.

“What’s a “World”?“

”…Generally speaking, a World is a place that embodies the hidden side of an Alice’s heart. Because their surface heart is soon to vanish, you see. They may be locked or unlocked, but primarily are locked. People don’t like others trampling on their hearts, after all. I manage the keys, so just ask, and you can go in and out.“

The White Rabbit took a short pause and smiled disagreeably. “Of course, that is assuming you can recover them, Alice.”

A haziness that was sitting in the corner of my heart welled up again. I tried to keep it aside and asked another question.

“What was that cat creature I met before coming here? Is he a guide like you?”

“…The Cheshire Cat, you mean. As you say, he is another guide. If you met him already, then I shouldn’t need to say a word. The sight of him makes me sick. Fills me with repugnance.”

I nodded slightly to show my agreement. I didn’t speak, though, because I felt that the White Rabbit’s obvious anger was starting to warp reality. Though if you ask me, I don’t think either answer would change much.

“I have him to thank for this ear, too, and this off-color skin. Our tastes don’t match at all, and frankly I hate everything about him. …Next time we meet, I’d like to give him a piece of my mind.”

He went on muttering curses and ill wishes. I took a few steps back. I worried that saying something even a little upsetting might cause him to give me a piece of his mind.

After watching from a distance for a while, the White Rabbit yawned loudly, either refreshed or bored. I was unsure whether he might just fall asleep on the spot, but he beckoned me to come back, and I complied.

“I can answer one more question for you. How about it?” …I still sensed a little bit of irritation.

“Um… What do you like, Mr. White Rabbit?”

I was looking for a safe question to get away from the other stuff, but as soon as I said it, I felt like I’d messed up. There’s nothing more boring than having to answer a question about yourself.

I felt the blood drain from my face, but looking at the White Rabbit’s, he didn’t seem especially displeased.

“Me? Other than being a guide… …I like children, I suppose.”

I opened the door indicated by the White Rabbit with care. It was dark on the other side, and I couldn’t see a thing.

“…The lights will come on eventually. Just watch out for you-know-who.” The White Rabbit still hadn’t moved an inch, and waved me off to say “get going already.” It kind of annoyed me, but knowing it wouldn’t do any good to stay here, I proceeded through the door.

In the darkness, I found some stairs. I carefully went up the steps one at a time, holding onto the handrail. Just as I reached the top step, my vision went white and I reflexively shut my eyes.

“Yo! You doing well for yourself? I’m feelin’ fiiine.”

A voice came at my back, and my spine shivered. I didn’t need to turn around to know who it was.

My vision was still fuzzy, but I ignored him and tried to go forward. Instantly, the Cheshire Cat behind my back was grinning in front of me.

“Goin’ for a walk? Or you lookin’ for something?” He spun a key around one of his claws.

“Keys? Wouldn’t know, no sir. That’s the truth and nothin’ but. Sure, I did steal ‘em. But only ‘cause somebody else asked me to. It’s true, I tell ya!”

What a talkative cat. But it caught my attention: did someone really ask him to do it? If so, who could that be? I wondered if the Mad Hatter or March Hare would show up too. And if they did, I hoped they’d be more proper than these jokers.

“Can’t tell you who, nope. I may be a liar, but I wouldn’t lie to a friend, friend. Besides, I’m only a guide… So I’ll just give you a hint.”

He spun in place, and the key in his paw suddenly vanished.

“Here’s your hint! There’s one to be found in each world,” the Cheshire Cat explained with a raised claw. “See, I’m only as much of a pain as you-know-who is.”

“…Is there no other way to open the doors?”

“No, no, ‘course not. Maybe if you told me your mom’s maiden name, or the name of your pet. …Whoops! Don’t remember, huh!”

So there isn’t, I thought, and at the same time figured that by “you-know-who,” he meant the White Rabbit. The White Rabbit had called the Cat that as well, similarly loath to speak his name.

“Ding ding ding! You’re a clever squirt. Ugh, but just sayin’ his name ruffles my fur. He messed me up just as bad, underneath this here hood.”

He thrust his paw into the hood, and disgusting squishy sounds came from within; I couldn’t help but turn away. Judging from the sounds, I couldn’t even picture how what was in that hood could have a coherent outline.

“…Wanna take a look? May be a tad grotesque for a li’l’un like you.”

I silently shook my head. There wasn’t any particular reason, other than I didn’t want to talk with the Cheshire Cat any longer.

“Alright, time’s up! Hey, good luck! Oh, and last things last… Don’t peer too hard into people’s hearts. Careful now!”

With a sneer, the Cheshire Cat turned around and was gone.

I kind of felt a loss of motivation. But I was also scared of making the White Rabbit wait.

I forced my heavy legs forward. There were five doors before me, equally-spaced. These were the doors to the Worlds mentioned by the White Rabbit.

I approached one door and put my hand on the knob. …What could be behind this door? I suddenly hesitated to open it.

Something melancholy crawled up from my toes, coiling around my leg. An unknown dread went up my spine. My hand was trembling on the doorknob.

I shook my head and regained composure. It’s fine - this is a dream. Whether it’s a good one or a bad one, it’ll be over when I wake up. It’s all just happening in a dream.

This is just a dream, so it’s okay…

I took a big breath to calm myself. And I slowly turned the knob to open the door to the World.

5

“…You’re coming along too?”

With my hand on the doorknob, I spoke to the shadow behind me without turning to it.

“Is there a problem?”, the shadow replied with a hint of a sneer.

“No, I didn’t make you promise not to. …As long as you keep to what you did promise.”

“Sure! No worries. I’ve never lied, not once.”

I heard excited footsteps behind me. What did he find so amusing…? But you couldn’t get along with the denizens here thinking normally. So I quickly renounced that train of thought.

I looked again at the doorknob my hand was on. How many years had it been since I turned it last?

I needed to end this as soon as possible. Strengthening my resolve, I twisted the knob and forcefully opened the door.

Alice mare - Chapter 2

Chapter 2: Two of Us

1

What I found through the door was someone’s room, one I was familiar with. In the corner were two beds of different colors, looking comfy next to one another.

“Oh! Alice! You’re up? Good morning!”

A familiar person was smiling innocently at me from the middle of the room. White hair swept in a loose wave, with purplish-red highlights slightly darker than her eyes. It was Letty. Why was she here…?

“Hey, hey hey hey! I’m really bored right now. So let’s play! Let’s play! Play play play!”

Not waiting for an answer, she grabbed my hands and swung them up and down. The sheer force of it blew away the minor doubts I’d had.

“Play! Play! Play!”

This sort of heavy-handed invitation was Letty, all right… and yet, I felt a discrepancy. Something was off.

“Play? Okay! What should we play? Hm, let’s see… Ah!”

Still not giving me a chance to answer either way, she twisted her neck around to an inconceivable angle. I yelped a little.

“Wanna open the closet?”, she asked with a higher-pitched voice than normal and an innocent look. She’d stopped swinging my hands, and I felt the pain in them.

I ran to the closet to get away from Letty. It had the same design as the one in my room. …Was it okay to just open it?

I looked back at Letty warily. Her neck was back in its typical position, and she smiled at me like usual. I recalled her closet had lots of toys in it. What would it be today? Maybe we’d play with dolls, or -

In an instant, my body was sucked into the closet. To be exact, it felt more like just my soul was being sucked in. Sharp, metallic sounds rang in my ears.

And I fell unconscious.

When I woke up, I was in a bed. But not a bed I had any memory of.

The pillow was hard as stone, and the blanket ragged and dusty. Even just adjusting my body slightly caused loud creaking. It was a crude bed which had me doubting if one could get any sleep in it.

I sat up and observed my surroundings. The wooden walls and floors were decayed and blackened in places. Mushrooms I didn’t know the names of grew in the corner. Dust flew up with every step, telling me the room probably wasn’t cleaned, ever. The air felt a little damp.

Was this the World the White Rabbit spoke of? While it felt much closer to the real world than where I’d been before, it was odd to think that this room I had absolutely no memory of was “an embodiment of my heart.” …Maybe I only felt that way because I’d lost my memories in an accident?

Maybe it would help me remember something, I thought as I opened up a small dresser nearby. Small berries and dry leaves were stored with care inside. I took one of the leaves, and when I turned it over, found something written on it in small letters. But I couldn’t comprehend the words; the writing was too messy, I supposed.

I gave the entire room a quick look, but it didn’t get me any recalled memories, and I found nothing resembling a key. I sighed, getting a little tired.

I went up to the window to see what it was like outside. Trees surrounded the house, completely blocking out the sky. Was it built in the middle of the forest? I put my hand to the window to try and open it and pushed forward.

Crack!

My hand alone pushed forward. The glass was shattered. It was only a light push, I thought… Could I not control my strength?

I carefully extracted my hand and found several small shards in my palm and wrist. I carefully plucked them out. Blood came out into little globes and dripped to the floor.

Oddly, I felt no pain. No, I guess that was normal for being in a dream. While it was surely my wrist, I was looking at it like it was someone else's.

I stared absentmindedly for a while, then remembered the key, and went to the door to try another room.

I twisted the doorknob, pushed and pulled, but the door didn't budge. I checked all over, but there was no keyhole or lock. After turning it somewhat roughly, it finally opened with a loud click.

As I went to go through the door, a pain shot through my temple like a surge of electricity and stopped me. Despite not feeling any pain when I was injured by the glass…

"There was a little, run-down house deep in the woods."

"In this little, run-down house lived a mother, a father, and a girl and boy."

"Their lives were very needy. But the mother and father were kind. The girl was always hungry, but she did her best to endure it."

As my ears buzzed, a voice seemingly reciting a storybook echoed through my head.

My forehead also ached during that time. But I couldn't sit around too much while I was making the White Rabbit wait. Ignoring the unpleasant metallic sounds, I pushed the door open and proceeded on.

The next room looked like a combined dining room and bedroom. In the center was a wooden table with three chairs around it. Beside the door I came through was a large dresser, and on the opposite end were two beds. It was a pretty big room.

The room was as dusty as the other one, but had a faint smell of something tasty. I checked the pot on the table and found a small quantity of berry soup. Past the table was

another door, which clattered from time to time. It probably led outside, and was being blown by the apparent strong winds. Yet it was warm inside thanks to the fireplace being lit.

…Was someone here recently?

If the owner was here… I wondered what would happen if they caught me.

“Don’t peer into people’s hearts…” I pondered the advice the Cheshire Cat gave me before coming here.

The Rabbit said that people’s hearts became Worlds. So maybe the Cat was actually warning me not to enter any Worlds at all.

…I didn’t know. What should I believe?

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I needed to get out. I wouldn’t come to an answer like this. Deciding I’d focus on finding the key for now, I went to the dresser right next to the door.

Come to think of it, when I found the key, how would I get back to that place? Maybe if I just went back under the covers, I’d…

“…There, wrong.”

“Huh? …Whoa!”

I reflexively backed away from the voice, whoever it was, and fell on my bottom. Taking another look, I noticed what looked like eyes floating slightly above me.

…This was a dream world. I went in intending to not be surprised if anything unusual spoke, but I just wasn’t expecting a dresser to.

It had said “not there,” albeit in a sort of broken way. Maybe this dresser knew where the key was. So I asked, still on my rear end, “Hey, do you know anything about a key?”

But the dresser ignored me, its eyes shooting left and right. “Medal, none. None, none…”

It seemed to be looking for a medal… and wasn’t in the mood to talk with me. I ignored it too, standing up and reaching for one of the top-most drawers of the dresser. However, as I was about to open it, a shrill scream in my ears denied me.

“Can I open your drawers if I find the medal?”

After a brief silence, its shifting eyes landed straight on me, staring intently.

“…Medal.”

…Could I take that as a yes?

After searching the room for a while, I noticed a memo underneath the wooden table. Likely from someone living here. I slowly read it aloud.

“…To my family: Do you know where my gold medal is? I had it in my pocket before bed… If you find it, put it in the very top dresser drawer on the left side. - Dad”

I thought. “In his pocket before bed… Maybe one of those beds?”

Two beds sat in the corner of the room. They were just as crude as the one I woke up in, so they creaked and sunk down when I got on top of them.

“Here it is.”

Reaching my hand in the gap between the bed and wall, I touched something cold and hard that wasn’t the floor. Carefully using my sense of touch, I picked it up. A gold medal with a picture of an unknown building engraved on it. This was what that dresser wanted.

Wiping the dust off my sleeve, I returned to the dresser. Putting it in the top-left drawer as the memo instructed, its floating eyes closed and it shouted happily. Must have been the right medal.

I was allowed to examine all the drawers then, but found nothing that looked to be the key. It had evidently been a fool’s errand.

“…Medal, thanks,” the dresser suddenly said to me. “Dad, be glad.”

…Father.

I was so busy with looking for the key that I had no time to think about my parents. I was struck with an indefinable emptiness again. Even in this house, for what it was, a mother, father, and child seemed to have eaten together around this table. Judging from the number of beds, it was just those three.

“…A family of three?”

A niggling feeling. Who lived here, exactly…?

“Dad, mom… daughter, Rick.”

The dresser responded to my mumbling. Daughter, and… Rick?

“By daughter, you mean… Letty?”

“Letty, Rick, Letty, Rick, Letty…”

The dresser kept repeating itself. As it went on, I recalled what happened before I arrived here. Before I woke up in this house - I met Letty.

The White Rabbit said that “the hidden side of Alice’s heart becomes a World,” but why was Letty there? And if this was a World based on my heart, I would have liked to see something that felt at least a little familiar. It was strange how I’d never seen any of this before, how it all seemed distant to me. Doubt after doubt surfaced and fell.

Wait. Actually, he said “an” Alice, didn’t he?

…What if I wasn’t the only Alice?

In that case, maybe this was Letty or Rick’s World. Realizing that, I decided I would leave the house to look for the two of them. In any event, I couldn’t find the key anywhere in here.

I turned the knob on the other door, but it wasn’t opening, just making a low sound. Next, I twisted the knob and pushed forcefully against the door with my weight, but this time I was too forceful, and my body flung to the ground.

“…”

I sighed, sat up, and shook off some dirt. Looking around, I saw innumerable trees around the house, echoing eerily every time the wind came through. …Yes, this seemed to be a forest, all right.

I walked quickly down the sole path through the trees. Oddly, there was only this path going straight ahead, so my fear of possibly being lost soon vanished.

It was like I was being guided somewhere. And I simply followed those directions.

After walking for a while, I found a large sign and a small figure up against it. Could it be…? I ran over and confirmed it was Letty. She was huddled up and staring into space, maybe not noticing me.

“Are you okay, Letty?”

“…I’m thirsty… Rick…”

I grabbed her shoulders and shook her, but she just wasn't going to notice me. She just repeatedly said she was thirsty. If I went back to the house, I might find water. I wasn't especially confident in that, but I didn't want to leave Letty wanting.

"Stay here, Letty. I'll bring some water."

Letty didn't respond. She just trembled like she was terrified, the ribbons on her chest shaking. I patted her head, then hurried back the way I came.

Back at the house I left just ten or twenty minutes ago, I found a well I failed to notice earlier, obscured by thick vegetation. I looked down nervously; there was clear water down at the bottom.

I grabbed the bucket next to the well and carefully filled it with water. I was glad to have obtained water so much quicker than I expected, but that relief only lasted a moment.

"…I can't take it like this."

It seemed impossible to detach the bucket firmly attached to the well. Maybe there was something in the house I could use to get the water in this bucket to Letty.

I slipped past the door which I'd forgotten to close earlier. After a short search, I found a small cup with some cracks. There was writing on the bottom, but it was squiggly, like worms; I couldn't comprehend it.

Finding no better methods, I had to take what I could get. I just needed to get some water to Letty quickly… So I transferred only a small amount of the water from the bucket to the cup and carried it back to Letty, careful not to spill any.

Letty looked about the same as before, trembling and staring into space. I gently brought the cup of water to her hands.

"…Water!" Letty suddenly swiped the cup from me and downed it all.

"Ah… Allen! Allen, you brought me water? I was really parched. …And there was no one else here."

She smiled happily at me, calm after drinking the water, but then suddenly looked uneasy.

"Hey… Allen, do you know where this is and why we're here?"

"Huh? Um… Well, I think this is a dream."

"…A dream?"

I didn’t understand a lot of what was going on myself, but seeing her so distraught, I just went and told her it was a dream. Letty was surprised, but also looked somewhat relieved.

“I see… it’s a dream. Well, I was surprised. It looked exactly like where I used to live. This cup is from my house, too. Look, it has my name on it!”

She showed me the bottom of the cup. That was her name? Actually, it occurred to me that the dried leaves I saw carefully stored in the dresser after waking up here might have had the same pattern on them.

“It says Letty Amery. My mom taught me how to write my name, but I still wasn’t very good at the time.”

She tilted her head with some embarrassment. I sweated a little, worried it might go spinning again, but this Letty I was looking at was the one I knew.

“Okay, let’s play! I usually play with Rick in my dreams, so it’ll be my first time playing with someone else!” She grabbed my arms cheerfully.

“…Oh, yeah, Rick. We need to look for him too. I bet he’s feeling lonely right now. Also… I don’t want to be here.”

I thought she’d swing my arms around as usual, but sadly, Letty’s head just sank down.

“…Don’t leave me alone, okay?”

I grabbed Letty’s small hands tightly. They were kind of warm.

“We’ll look together. I’m kind of looking for something, too,” I informed her, also trying to encourage her a little. She looked up and slowly nodded after a bit of hesitation.

Glad to see Letty cheering up slightly, I said “let’s go” and took her hand. But the path past the sign wasn’t like the straight path I’d been on thus far; it was split like a tree branch, the paths weaving through the forest like snakes.

Just as I stopped to think about how to proceed, I felt a pain in my temple again.

“It happened very suddenly. Her mother, as if a changed person, began treating her daughter coldly.”

“As soon as her father went out, her mother dragged the girl out into the woods, and told her this:”

““There’s no more food for you. You can’t come back home.”“

“Are you okay, Allen?”

Letty’s concerned voice brought me back to my senses. I heard that voice in my head again. From Letty’s dubious look, I could only assume I was the only one who heard it.

“…I’m fine. Let’s go. Make sure you don’t fall behind.”

I’d unconsciously brought my hand to my forehead to curb the pain, so I took it away and grabbed Letty’s again. We navigated the twisty paths using instinct alone.

“…My house was deep in the forest. There were lots of animals, and the air was really nice. I was always hungry, but I still loved it.”

Letty had suddenly begun to talk about her old home.

“Is that the house next to the well?”

“Yes! That’s my house. Mother, father, and me and Rick lived there. …But my mother wasn’t my real mother.”

So that was the house Letty lived in, as the dresser said. Then something was definitely strange - but no, I couldn’t quite identify what it was.

“Father said my real mother passed away from an illness. And… she liked to tease me, so I didn’t like my new mother.”

Letty’s face scrunched up like she ate a really sour grapefruit.

“She used to be nice. But she just suddenly got mean. I bet she was cursed and turned into a witch. She’d grab my hand and drag me into the dark forest. The first time she left me there, I couldn’t help but get thirsty.”

I felt some of the warmth leaving Letty’s hand. Perhaps when she was trembling before at the sign, she was remembering those times.

“But whenever I’m sad or lonely, Rick is always with me. He’ll always talk to me. From good morning to good night. And if I’m teased, he’ll get revenge for me. He’s a very, very strong boy.”

After saying this, she came to a stop and stared at something. I followed her gaze. A white bird was resting atop a branch low enough to reach.

“It’s a birdie!”

Immediately, Letty let go of my hand and ran over. The bird didn’t flee, and even let Letty pet it, closing its eyes pleasantly. I approached Letty and the bird.

“Thataway is the same. But that way is different.”

…The bird spoke. But there was a lesser element of surprise than with the dresser, so I didn’t go flying back or anything this time.

“Hm? Well, yeah, I’m Letty, and he’s Allen. So we are different!”

Letty must have understood this was all happening in a dream, as she had no problem going completely with its logic. She was just carrying a conversation with the bird.

“Everyone different, everyone good. But everyone wants to be the same. In the end, though, can’t be,” the bird stated confusingly. Letty had a curious look.

The bird opened its eyes - black, swirling eyes that seemed more disconcerting the more you looked at them. It spoke to Letty.

“Never two the same human. Looks similar, maybe. But look closer, and it’s different. But you, exactly the same. Weird. Why?”

“…Me?”

With that, the bird flew out of Letty’s palm.

“Ah, wait!”

Letty went chasing after the bird. …Shoot, I let go of her hand. I hurried after her so she wouldn’t get out of sight, but Letty was faster than me, and her shadow grew smaller and smaller among the trees.

Following the rustling sounds, I finally saw her shadow stop. I slowed down a little and approached. “Letty?”

…No.

It was Rick standing in front of me. Though I was sure I was chasing Letty’s shadow… I felt a vague theory I’d had being validated.

“What is it? Why are you here, Allen?”

“…Where’s Letty?”

“Letty’s saying good night now. It’s very dark around here with all the trees, and Letty hates dark places,” Rick responded as coolly as ever.

“I’ve never seen you and Letty next to each other. Letty said you’re always together. But… there were only three beds in that house.”

Rick didn’t respond. I finally saw the problem here.

…If the parents, Letty, and Rick were living in that house, there would have to be four beds. Sure, two could arguably sleep in one bed, but with beds that size, it would be tough even for two kids.

“Yes, that’s right. You’re correct. …Because when I’m here, Letty is in my heart, saying good night. And vice versa.”

“…Why?”

“Letty has many things she can’t handle - pain, dark places, and so on. But none of that is an issue for me. So I take it in her place. …That’s surely the reason I was born.”

I bit my lip. This was probably the first time I’d seen Rick express this much emotion. … So Letty and Rick weren’t separate people, but split personalities.

Yet, Letty and Rick’s room at the facility had two beds. That contradiction was what was throwing me off.

“It’s all the witch’s fault. All of it, all of it, all of it… I have to get revenge on that witch who bullies Letty. When I met Teacher earlier, he told me to back off, but… I can’t do that.”

“Rick? …Teacher?”

As Rick went on muttering things, his skin and eyes were turning a sickly purple.

Met Teacher… So he was here, too? I shook Rick’s shoulders to try and get him to talk, but he pushed my hands away.

“…Keep it secret from Letty.”

His face was swollen enough you could hardly distinguish the parts of it, but the strong, gentle voice, wherever it came from, was definitely Rick’s. Then with an uncertain gait, Rick vanished into the forest.

…I had to follow him.

My legs moved before my brain. Even if this was a dream, I felt like even when we woke

up, Rick’s face would stay all purple like that.

My heartbeat quickened. I gasped for breath, and I grew uneasy. I had to stop Rick before he reached the witch. Hurry, hurry, hurry…

“Yahh!”

As I recklessly ran down the forest paths, I crashed into someone and heard them scream. I thought for a moment I’d caught up to Rick, but it was Letty who’d fallen to the ground.

“Oh, Allen! Sorry, I went on my own to chase the bird… Are you okay? You look like you’re in a really bad way…!”

Letty, still on the ground, patted my head while I had my hands on my knees, out of breath. At that moment, I felt my chest tighten. …What was this feeling?

“…I haven’t found Rick either. He’s looked a little sad lately. But he seems to have so much fun when we’re talking. …I wonder why?”

Letty looked down again and brought her hand back from my head to her knees.

“Hey Allen, do you have someone important to you?”, she abruptly asked.

I searched my memories for an answer, but since I couldn’t find a clear one, I just said nothing.

“Oh, that’s right… You lost your memories. …Sorry for asking you such a sad question…”

She patted me head again apologetically. When I was alone, I just had to put up with my unending emptiness, but now Letty was here consoling me. It was a nostalgic scene somehow, and gave my heart a little peace.

“It’s fine. Thanks, Letty. …We need to go find Rick.”

I held out my hand, and she took it with a big nod. Her hand seemed significantly colder than when I first held it.

“Looking for something?”, a voice whispered from behind. A chill went down my spine.

“Did you say something, Allen?”

“Nope, that’d be me!”

Suddenly, a bipedal cat in a hood appeared before us.

“Haven’t seen you before. Hello, Alice. I’m the Cheshire Cat. How you doin’?”

“…? My name’s Letty. I’m not Alice,” she denied, tilting her head curiously.

“Nah, you’re Alice. You there, too. ‘Cause I said so!” The Cat did a creepy laugh.

“Found what you were looking for over there. Looked pretty tasty, so I aaalmost ate ‘im up. But it wasn’t quite time yet.”

“Um, I’m looking for Rick, though? Rick isn’t food.”

“From your perspective, maybe! Ooh, and I get two helpings. Whatcha ma call that… one rock two birds?”

This cat was a wizard at making people uncomfortable. I grabbed Letty’s hand with some force and walked past the Cheshire Cat.

“Ooh, that’s cold. Well, if yer cold, I recommend the fireplace. Mweeheeheehee!”

The Cat’s laughter echoed off the trees. I walked quickly down the path with Letty until we couldn’t hear it anymore.

“Something smells sweet…”, Letty remarked. Focusing on my nose, a faintly sweet smell like candy was wafting around.

“This way!”

“Ah! Letty!”

She brushed me off as I tried to stop her, and Letty ran off once again. I ran as fast as I could, determined not to lose sight of her this time. I was worried I might not last if I had to run for a long time, but her destination was closer than I was fearing.

“…It’s a candy house…”

Letty’s eyes sparkled. Before us was a house made entirely of candy, just like the one in Hansel and Gretel. The sweet aroma was strong here, and I found myself drooling a little.

Letty’s throat gulped, and she proceeded ahead. I followed as she approached the ominous-feeling house.

The front door was made of chocolate. When she put her hand to it, it started to melt

slightly from her warmth. Letty stared at it curiously and licked the chocolate off her finger. I put my hand on the biscuit doorknob and tried to open the door.

“…Huh? It won’t open?”

All the doors in the World seemed to be like this, never just opening from a single turn of the knob. I thought I might have to get rough with it again, but a candy house was much more carefully constructed than a normal house, so it was hard for me to get the resolve. In the meantime, Letty turned the knob instead, and with a click, the door opened easily.

“Hey, what? It’s not locked! Let’s go inside! I wonder if we could have just a few bites…”

Letty headed right into the house, smiling and wondering what she was going to eat. She’d been looking awfully sad, so maybe it would be good for her to take a nice break here…

Oh, but if only the truth could be that sweet.

Letty immediately came to a stop, and her body froze up. I looked to her to see what was the matter. Her big eyes were opened wide, and the ribbons on her chest shook again. Following her gaze, I saw something in front of the fireplace, humanlike, black from head to toe, watching the fire burn.

“…Why did you come back?”, the black figure murmured without any movement.

“I always put you far down unknown roads. At this point, I can’t care for you. You’ll only get hurt more. So then… why even come back?”

“I… I don’t… like this. Rick… h-hel… p…”

Letty’s face turned pale as she intermittently repeated Rick’s name; she seemed terribly afraid of the thing in front of her.

The black figure slowly turned around. I thought it was completely black, but an old woman’s face was eerily there among the black mass.

“That name again. Rick, Rick… Who is that you keep talking to? There’s no one here but me, my husband, and you.”

The old woman narrowed her eyes and glared at me, spitting out a low “…Disgusting.”

“! He exists! Rick definitely exists! Why - how can you…”

Letty fell over and began to shake. I reached out to support her, and as I touched her back, Letty stopped shaking at once.

…Letty’s skin and eyes were turning purple. My body naturally stepped away from her.

“Evil witch… Why are you always, always doing these things?! I’m… going to protect Letty!”

The one who stood up looked like Letty, but their voice and tone could be none other than Rick’s. …He’d come to her aid.

“…! Why, you!”

The woman deemed a witch raised a large knife and brought it down toward Rick. I immediately pushed Rick out of the way, and shoved the witch toward the fireplace.

The fire engulfed the witch, and her body swelled red. Her shrill scream nearly blew out my eardrums. I covered my ears, but it felt like it was infiltrating my whole body.

“…Rick? …M-Moth… er…”

The swollen-purple Letty approached the fireplace as if to chase after the witch. The fire seemed to be growing. I reached out, worried for Letty’s safety, and was hit with a massive headache.

“The woods were dark, and she didn’t know her way back. The girl closed her eyes and thought.”

““Why? Is it because I was weak? That’s why there’s no food for me?”“

“As she mumbled to herself, a lone boy talked to the girl.”

“…“I’ll be strong, so you can be weak.”“

“The girl was terribly surprised. And she said “Yes, that’s right,” before falling asleep.“

”…The girl renounced having to face up to herself.“

…When I came to, the witch, Letty, and Rick were all gone.

All that was left were giant, howling flames flying about like fish in water.

“Why…”

Unable to process the situation, I just stared blankly. A small object gleamed at my feet, red in the light of the flames. It had the shape of a key.

And it had been so hard to find when I was looking for it. Something akin to disgust welled up from my heart. The flames had spread from the fireplace to consume the candy house - to bake the whole thing.

If this was a dream, I wanted to wake up. Praying for it, I touched the key at my feet.

“Oh, Allen. Bringing a book to your room again?”

“Yeah, I’m at a really good part right now. I’m not going to be able to sleep if I don’t know what happens.”

“Heehee… My, my. You’d better go to bed early, or you won’t wake up in the morning. … Good night, Allen.”

My senses were gradually sucked up, and my body was flung into darkness again. Was that a memory just now? I knew that woman who said good night to me and kissed me on the cheek.

That’s right… She was my ___.

2

There didn’t appear to be any hints toward destroying the dream here either. I smelled a burnt aroma.

“Is this the memory of my first meeting with her?”

The place I had been earlier seemed to be a World further in the past than this. If I wasn’t careful, I would have seen that scene again. That incident happened when she was still young. She surely couldn’t face up to it.

My meeting with Letty Amery took place in this forest.

I was walking through this forest on the way to the house of my mentor, Mrs. Revis. Sensing an unusual burning smell, I looked around and saw a huge plume of black smoke up ahead. The typically-calm forest was unusually noisy, I recall. Having a terrible feeling, I ran toward the smoke.

As the smoke thickened and became more visible, I heard crying that got gradually louder. When I found the source of the smoke, that was also when I found her sobbing.

The house in front of her was engulfed in fiercely-burning flames. It transferred to the nearby trees, gradually spreading. Thinking that she might soon be swallowed up as well, I

called to her, and decided to bring her to the facility for the time being.

After calling the police and fire department back at the facility, I told Mrs. Revis I wouldn't be able to visit for a few days.

The police reported several days later than she was the only daughter at that residence. But they also said that no one's remains were found among the wreckage. So then where did the parents vanish to? I tried to ask her about it, but overwhelmed by the situation, she was in no condition to talk.

However, when I went to check on her one night, she seemed very different from the way she was during the day, and claimed to be a different person.

"Letty doesn't like the dark. So I let Letty say good night and take her place."

That was when I first learned her name, as well as Rick's. Rick readily answered all of my questions. From what he told me, Rick seemed to be a split personality Letty had created to protect herself from her mother's abuse.

Yet when I asked Letty to confirm this, she strongly denied it, insisting he was a different person who existed separate from her.

"…Rick protects me when mother bullies me. But while Rick was saying good night, she took me out into the forest. The first time, Rick brought me back home. The second time… he wasn't there. The sun was starting to come up, so I decided to take Rick home instead this time. But when I got home… the house was burning."

She spoke to me slowly, but as she recalled it, her face tensed up and she was overtaken with fear. When I held her shaking body, she blinked with relief, and slowly started talking again.

"When I came back home after the first time, lots of things started going missing from the house. Though my and Rick's things were never taken…"

"Were they big things, or little things?"

"All kinds of things. Food, and rings, and frying pans…"

Her family seemed rather poor. Perhaps they were selling off things they didn't need to make ends meet?

Summing up the story from her and Rick, the conclusion that the parents had abandoned their child and fled in the night seemed plausible.

Letty, though, claimed her mother had always been kind to her, even if she wasn't her biological daughter - and then suddenly became cold, a changed woman. Could someone's

attitude truly change like that with no impetus?

…Or maybe she had always been dissatisfied with her?

“Oh yeah… I feel like I heard this strange laughter. Something like “weeheehee.”“

…Laughter?

“Was it a slightly hoarse voice that burned into your brain?”

“Sort of like that. I remember it pretty clearly,” she replied blankly. Then she yawned, so I let her borrow my bed to take a nap.

This timing was almost too good to be true. But I still had a small bit of hesitation. What should I do…?

“Teacher! I wrote in my notebook!”

One day, she lept on me from behind. It was a forceful leap, so I yelled a little.

“…How about Rick’s?”

“Oh! Um… Here! It’s in my pocket!”

She handed me the two burgundy notebooks with a wide smile.

“Thanks. It’s almost time to sleep, so don’t get too overexcited.”

“Okay! Don’t stay up too late either, Teacher!”

I watched Letty as she dashed out of my room. Her parents were never found, and no other relatives ever came for her, so I ended up taking Letty in at the facility indefinitely. Letty was slowly regaining her cheer. However, judging from the notebooks, Rick seemed the more brooding one.

I know why. I know why mother, and father, and our home burned. But I won’t say it. Because it’d only make Rick more sad.

That was written on the first new page of Letty’s notebook. The paper was warped in places, the letters blurred. I hadn’t yet told her that rather than burning down with the house, her parents had gone missing.

…I still had no reason to do so.

Letty told me that Rick had taken revenge in her place, burning down the witch and her home for her. But when I heard Rick's side of the story, I realized there were some misunderstandings between them.

The second time Letty was deserted, he woke up during the night and returned home, and by that time, there was no one left at the house. If Letty woke up then, like it or not, she would realize her parents had abandoned her. As that would make her sadder than anything, he decided to set it all aflame and obscure the truth.

When he told me this, I became convinced of my theory that her parents had left her and fled somewhere far away. And the one who had set it all up, it had to be…

I walked carefully on the unpaved, uneven road. There seemed to be nothing more I could do. I sat down on a particularly good-looking stump.

Rick was born to protect her from her mother's abuse. But her mother wasn't around anymore. The reason his heart was starting to fall apart had to lie there.

I recalled the first page of his notebook.

If I take everything on myself, she can smile all the time. I like her, I really do. But why was I born?
Teacher, you prepared two beds, and clothes for me too. But is this right? Is it wrong for me to exist?
Teacher, she may be her, but then who am I?

"…How should I have answered?"

He must have feared that his existence would mean she wouldn't have to face herself. I clutched my hair. If we got back safely, I would have to give him a proper answer. Yes, if…

As my thoughts turned, I suddenly heard a beast-like howling.

"…Hm? Is the World starting to break apart?"

Strange. The World starting to break indicated that its creator had broken. Before coming here, I met Rick and told him, "Don't move from this spot. It'd be dangerous for you and

her to move around too much.” He didn’t seem the type to break a promise. So had something caused him to switch to her, and see that scene once more?

The ground split, and a black haze came from it and wound around my feet. I leaned my body toward it. I couldn’t stop his… and her, ruin.

I sunk into the darkness. There, my whole body was swallowed up.

3

“Ah, you made it back. …Why are you crying?”

I didn’t even know the answer to that. I felt like I’d even forgotten the name these emotions had.

“You appear to have recovered a key. Well done. Hm…? Is it only the one?”

“…Che… Er, that guy said he put one key in each World.”

Just as I was about to speak the Cheshire Cat’s name, the White Rabbit glared daggers at me, so I quickly stopped myself.

“One World at a time, is it… What a bother. Why such stalling…?” His eyes narrowed with gloom.

“Well, fair enough. You recovered one of them. That’s something. I’ll use this to open the door to the next World.”

I heard a door unlocking in the distance. He wanted me to go to another one of those places, huh. I stood there for a little bit, and he started to tap his foot impatiently.

“Don’t worry. It’s just a dream. It’ll all be back to normal when you wake. Those emotions and the scene you witnessed were all illusions. That was your first instinct too, was it not?”

Not coming any closer, the White Rabbit spoke with the most gentle voice I’d ever heard out of him. I had thought of it as a dream, but those feelings, that spectacle of flames, were burned in my mind in a very real-feeling way. Could dreams be like this?

Still, the moment I touched that key, I regained a small memory of my past. The one who said good night to me and kissed me on the cheek - it was surely my mother.

If I found another key, maybe I could see a slightly later memory. That hope invited me toward the next World door.

“Come to think of it, White Rabbit, what do you do here?”

“…I don’t do anything here. That’s my normal. Because isn’t it too much bother? Time and events are predecided, and I just live in that flow. It’s much too much of a pain to go against the grain. Hardly necessary.”

So he was just standing here for hours on end. I thought to myself that that seemed like much more of a pain and bother, but the denizens here were all very strange, I recalled.

“Well, I’m counting on you once more.”

I nodded, and headed for the next door.

“He came up with all the rules of these Worlds, y’know. If the one who made the World goes under, so does their World.”

As I was about to open the second door, the Cheshire Cat appeared before me and started talking. I nearly crashed into him, which gave me a chill. Crashing into that bizarre body of his… just thinking about it made me shudder.

“I wouldn’t make nothin’ like that. But just give it time, he says! Makes all these dumb rules, he does! Bah! But we just gotta follow ‘em…”

The Cheshire Cat whined and covered his face with his paws. But his grin was so wide, nearly reaching his ears, that it appeared to jut out from behind his hands.

“‘Cause if we don’t, we get punished.”

“…Do you want anything, or?”

I figured he might keep talking forever if I didn’t stop him. Trying to hide my disgust for him, I tried to speak mildly.

“What! Can’t a guy talk about what he likes? Cats die when they get too lonely, y’know. …Wait a sec, or was that people?”

As he joked, I considered my next move. If I said anything serious, he would dodge it and find a way to tease me again. It would definitely only exhaust me.

“Boy, you look like a wreck. Don’t need to get so worked up about somebody you just met. Or, hold on… Did you forget all your emotions and such, too?”

I had no response. I still didn’t fully understand myself.

“Oh, and how would I know about that? Well, that’s ‘cause I stole ‘em.”

I was speechless in the face of the Cheshire Cat's sudden, outrageous confession.

"I know everything that happened that day, and before it too. Not planning on giving it back, 'course… but you can have bits and pieces as cherries on top of finding the keys. You know the rest, right?"

As the Cat became more and more cocky, I sunk deeper. He must have delighted in seeing this happen to people.

"Tell me, is it really empty inside ya? …Well, prayin' on high you don't crack too quick. Sweet dreams!"

Before I knew it, he was gone. I began to sweat. But I had to get to the next World. Now I could feel like it wasn't the White Rabbit, wasn't the Cheshire Cat who was hurrying me along most - it was me.

What happened that day? What did I see, and what did I lose? I just wanted to know the truth. I wanted it back. I'd pushed my doubts about whether this was a dream or not out of mind.

I steadied my breathing. And I opened the door to the second World.

My house is deep in the forest.
There are lots of animals, and the air is really nice. It's a wonderful place.
My family is mother, father, and one more.
He's always with me. Always there for me. From good morning to good night.
But it's too bad he can't play tag or anything with me.

My mother isn't my real mother.
I heard my real mother passed away from an illness.
The mother I have now often teases that girl.
So I take the brunt of it for her. I'm responsible for all the hurtful things.
But when she's beaten, I can't protect her.

One day, mother said we'd go for a walk.
I didn't want to, but she dragged me by the hand into the forest.

Like usual, after walking a long way, mother said we'd take a break.
You stay here, she told me, and I sat there the whole time.
It got dark. I was scared. It was pitch black.

I was so, so scared. So I closed my eyes and talked to him.
What's your name? What's your favorite food? What don't you like?
I was surprised. He wasn't like me at all.

Is this the deep forest?
I should go back. I'm fine, but she doesn't like dark places.
Will she say she disgusts her again?
Why does that witch have to tease her so?
I have to do away with that evil witch.

I'm so hungry. If only my house and my clothes could be tasty sweets.
Then everyone in my family could have a good meal.
…Oh, but I guess chocolate melts really quick. That won't work.
It all burned up.

If I take everything on myself, she can smile all the time.
I like her, I really do. But why was I born?
Teacher, you prepared two beds, and clothes for me too.
But is this right? Is it wrong for me to exist?

Teacher, she may be her, but then who am I?

Alice mare - Chapter 3

Chapter 3: The Color Red

Once again, when I opened the second door, I found a familiar room. These World doors appeared to lead to rooms modeled after rooms in the facility. A large number of teddy bears were watching me, giving me déjà vu.

“…A-A… Alice?”

The absurd quantity of teddy bears grabbed my attention, but someone standing in the center of them spoke up, looking toward me. A red poncho and a puffy balloon skirt, the front of which was covered by a frilly white apron, light brown hair tied with circular red hairclips… It was Chelsy.

“…A-Ah…”

She seemed to want to say something, but couldn’t form a solid sentence. She seemed even more shy than usual.

“Want to play together?”, I invited, as she seemed at a loss. Chelsy was startled by my voice and yelped more pathetically and shrilly than usual.

“…Eh? Eh, uhhhmmm… …okay.”

“What should we do?”

“…Can you open the closet?”

The same answer I got from Letty. “Okay,” I replied, then stared closely at her. Her eyes were spinning around abnormally fast. I hurriedly turned away to look at the closet. An aroma of flowers was seeping through the gap. It calmed me a little.

When I put my hand to the door, I was sucked into the closet, heart and all.

The blankets were very warm and comfortable, and the light coming in the window made them warmer still. I briefly considered falling asleep here, then shook it out of my head and forced myself up. It must have been evening, as the room was turned a pretty orange color.

They weren’t as numerous as Chelsy’s room in the facility, but I saw many teddy bears sitting in neat rows. I picked one up and found it fluffy and very light. It appeared to be hand-sewn.

After carefully putting the teddy back in its place, I looked around the room. Nothing caught my eye. Judging from the teddy bears, I suspected this was Chelsy’s World, but saw no sign of her.

I approached the door and tried the knob. I prepared myself slightly, keeping in mind Letty’s World, but it clicked open with only a light turn, which left me a little disappointed.

I entered what looked like the dining room. It had a nice smell that brought to mind trees and flowers. To my side, I saw a door to a room neighboring the one I’d come out of. Deciding to explore that one later, I looked around this one and saw hunting implements in the corner. The bows and guns had an unusual, impressive presence. They sure looked strong…

In the opposite corner was a dresser. Before opening any drawers, I poked and prodded it to no particular reaction. It didn’t seem like this one would speak.

Inside one drawer was a number of letters. I hesitated a little as I went to pick one up, but then again, it was just a dream. What would be the harm? Looking at it that way, I opened up the envelope, and took out the stationery inside.

“Thank you for the letter. Is your mother all right? You shouldn’t push yourself too hard, either. If there’s anything you need, please get an adult to help.”

“I owe so much to your mother. If you don’t mind, I’d really like to see you again. Give

my best regards to her.”

The message had a very kind tone, the letters drawn carefully and large. Below this was a strange object that I could swear I’d seen before, and some kind of riddle.

All the other letters looked like further correspondence with the same person. The newest of them promised that the writer would be coming to the house soon to meet “your mother.” If this was Chelsy’s house, that must have meant Chelsy’s mother. …Deciding this had little to do with finding the key, I put the letters back in their envelopes and into the drawer.

I went to open the room next to the one I was first in. And again, the door opened for me without any problems. In Letty’s World, I’d had to force them open… What would explain that difference?

As soon as the door was open, a powerful scent raced into my nostrils. I had no memory of such a scent. Reflexively, I reached to hold my nose. It was so overpowering as to make me forget what I’d been thinking about.

At the back of the room, a girl was facing a table. I couldn’t see past her well enough to tell what she was doing. Slowly, I approached the table, the smell getting stronger with each step.

“Ch-Chelsy… Agh… What’re you doing?”

When I opened my mouth to speak, the smell infiltrated my body through it, and I coughed. The girl at the table, Chelsy, didn’t seem to notice me at all until I spoke, so she quickly turned around toward me and fell out of her chair.

She hastily tried to get back up, but seemed very disoriented and swatted at air. I extended my hand to her; her face went red and she timidly took it, finally getting up. She muttered something so quietly that I couldn’t hear. I think it might have been “thanks.”

“Squeak…”

I heard a little voice from somewhere. It turned out to be a mouse lying on the table, weakly crying. Beside it were a few bottles with some kind of medicine.

“…Animal experimentation?”

“Ah, n-no, Allen. Apparently its stomach hurts, so I was mixing things to make medicine for it… It isn’t going well…”

The source of the bizarre smell in the room seemed to be the medicines Chelsy had mixed. The contents of the containers were a hard-to-describe color and produced a lot of

worrying bubbles.

“You’re going to make it drink this?”

Chelsy swung her arms in a panic. “N-No, that’s one of the mistakes! It’ll explode if it drinks that!” Of course, she didn’t need to deny me that strongly to make me have reservations about offering this to the mouse… I had much more than a few already. Though I didn’t know how much humans and mice had in common.

“I-I’ll throw this away. It made the room smell really weird leaving it there, anyway…” Chelsy took the mysterious substance from my hands and left the room with it.

It had occurred to me that Chelsy didn’t seem to mind the smell. …Maybe she was accustomed to it?

Even with the source of it gone, the smell still filled the room and pierced my sinuses. I went to the window to try and air it out, and noticed the sky was a spine-chilling red. I pushed the window carefully to keep from breaking it. Lukewarm winds came into the room and brushed my cheek.

Finally, the strong odor came to be replaced with a pleasant floral smell. As I stood in the breeze, I heard Chelsy trotting back in.

“Whew… Huh? Allen? Were you getting hot with the window shut?”

I was sort of embarrassed that she saw me spacing out. I turned around and tried to play it off. “Oh, uh… Never mind that. You have to make that medicine, right?”

“Oh, right… for the mouse. The stomach medicine is made from mixing three of these colored medicines into the clear one… But I can’t read grandma’s memo…”

Chelsy handed me the note. It had the steps for making the medicine in somewhat unusual handwriting.

“I’m not sure if this is right, but… Is the order green, yellow, red?”, I told her, managing to interpret the note. Her face lit up, and she thanked me and turned back to the desk. Then, like she said, she poured the colored liquids into a clear one.

“Can you not read your grandma’s writing?”

“Um… Well, she usually shows me how to do it herself… I’m still not very good at reading her writing, and she tells me not to mess with medicine when I’m alone.”

“…But now is fine?”

“Not… really… But I need to, for this poor mouse…”

With a somewhat stressed look, Chelsy carefully mixed the medicine. Earlier, she said that drinking the other medicine would make you explode, so maybe now, too, a small slip-up could blow us to smithereens. With that in mind, just watching Chelsy's hands work made my heart pound.

"It's done! Oh, good… Mousey, drink this in three gulps."

The mouse quickly nodded its blue head and took the small container. What would happen to the mouse if it were to drink it all at once…? My mind was dominated by all kinds of ridiculous worries.

"Ahh, thanks. I feel much better. Your grandma's medicine's really something!"

The mouse acted like it was nothing and thanked us. I wasn't surprised, but Chelsy's eyes popped, and she hid behind me.

"I'll be going back home, now. Bye-bye." The mouse lept off the table and vanished who knows where.

"W-What was that…? A talking mouse is like something from a storybook, or a dream…"

"This is a dream, isn't it?"

"Huh?" Chelsy stared at me, surprised.

"It's a dream. It's fine," I remarked, telling it to myself as well. I wasn't sure how true it was. But the question was no longer a major one for me. She seemed to understand, and her tenseness melted away.

Perhaps getting embarrassed, she spoke quietly as she let go of my back. "I see… Well, this is my house. There are some differences, but the dressers had the same things in them, and my bed was just as warm, so I thought I'd come back for some reason…"

Actually, Letty had said something similar in the previous World… While I thought, a soft breeze blew in from the window.

"…This wind is really warm and refreshing," I idly remarked. Chelsy's face beamed.

"Oh, yeah, at this hour, it's warm since the sun is coming through. And the room's all orange and pretty."

"Yeah, it is. …Is that sweet smell flowers?"

"Yes! There's a garden near the house, with lots of different types! Um… Do you want to go see?"

Chelsy shyly invited me outside. I hadn't really investigated yet whether this room had the key in it or not, but I decided to go along with it for now. It sounded like it was close, and we could return here later if we needed to.

I went with Chelsy through the dining room to the front door. When I turned the knob, it just made a hoarse sound and didn't open. Repeated attempts all had similar results. All the doors in Letty's World had been like this, but this was the first such in this one.

"Huh? …It won't open?"

While I pondered whether I should use force, Chelsy took my place and twisted the knob. Then it opened easily, as if it had been waiting for her. Through the gap came a warm wind, carrying a stronger smell of flowers than before.

I looked at her hand with surprise, and she spoke sheepishly. "Um? It's not locked… Maybe it's kind of broken. I think my house has been here for a long time, so…"

Yet I could open all the other doors without issue, so I felt like it wasn't a structural problem. Were there requirements of some kind…?

While I baffled, Chelsy tugged my sleeve. I stopped thinking and just decided to go with it.

Taking a step outside, I looked to the sky. The sun shone redder than I thought, seeming to turn the whole sky that color.

"The sun seems a little more radiant than usual today…", Chelsy murmured, putting her hand over her eyes and looking up. Her childlike face was colored red by it, as well as her white apron, and her skirt was redder than ever.

"…I don't think I like this sky," Chelsy said with a frown, and dropped her gaze. "Let's keep going," she insisted, tugging my sleeve again.

"…Hm? Are these vegetables?" Curious about the fields I saw, I stopped Chelsy's hand.

"Huh? Oh… Yeah, we can't go to other towns for shopping, and the town's far away, so we try to grow as much ourselves as we can. I think now… Eek!"

Just as Chelsy, with a hint of bewilderment, pointed to the vegetables in the field to explain, a worm wrapped around her finger.

With a little scream, she immediately collapsed toward me, and we both fell on our bottoms.

"Ahh… S-Sorry, Allen! I-I grabbed your h, h, han…"

Just as we landed, Chelsy's little hand ended up on top of mine. It was slightly cold, and she promptly pulled it away. Her surprise was making her have trouble with articulation.

I gently escorted the worm, wriggling on the ground after Chelsy tossed it, back to the field, and extended my hand to Chelsy to pull her up. Her flailing limbs came to a stop, and she peered at me. I wasn't sure why, but she seemed afraid and nervous.

"We're going to the garden, right? If we don't hurry, it might turn night."

I personally doubted that would actually happen, but making sure to state a suitable reasoning, I grabbed her hand. Though she hesitated, she stood up with my help and neatly dusted off the dirt from her clothes.

"…You just have to go straight ahead here to reach the garden."

Chelsy circled around to the back of me and grabbed my sleeve. I think maybe she had a habit of grabbing sleeves. Just as I was about to take the path she indicated…

I felt the same pain as before, but it echoed more strongly.

"There was a white house near a flower garden."

"In this white house lived a mother, a father, and a girl. The father rarely came home to the house."

"The mother was old and frail, so the girl did various tasks in her stead."

"…en? Allen, are you okay?"

"Um? Oh, sorry… I'm fine."

When I came to, Chelsy was stroking my back. I had crouched to the ground from the pain, it seemed.

"If you're not feeling well, we don't have to go…"

I stood up. "No, I'm really fine. Let's go," I told Chelsy, and took a few steps. She didn't seem to understand what was going on, but after calling to her again, she hesitantly grabbed hold of my sleeve.

And we walked down the path to the garden.

“Oh, Allen, there it is!”, Chelsy happily shouted after walking a while.

I looked where she pointed. It was a garden packed with flowers of all colors, like a carpet on the ground. When the wind blew, a variety of aromas went through my body.

“Huh? These flowers shouldn’t be growing in this season, or these ones either… Well, it’s a dream, so I guess that can happen.”

Chelsy was carefully weaving some small flowers together into a ring shape. I watched her work for a while, and before I knew it, she had a wreath in her hands.

“Here, Allen. It’s kind of luxurious having all these flowers that bloom from spring to winter in one place, huh…?”

“Huh? For me…?” I was at a loss when she handed me the wreath with a sweet smile. “… I think it’d look better on you, Chelsy.”

I took the flower crown, but only to put it on Chelsy’s head. It stopped right above her forehead.

“Um… er… d-does it look good?”, she asked with concern. It definitely seemed like it suited her better than me, at least. She smiled in a significantly different way from usual. I nodded my head without question.

“I-I see. Thanks. …To tell the truth, I’m not supposed to stop in this garden along the way.”

Chelsy awkwardly removed the crown from her head and dropped her gaze to her hands.

“But… You know, sometimes I think it would make her happy to pick some of these flowers for her… I was told not to, but I just think that would be better. …What would you do in that situation, Allen?” She timidly looked up at me.

“…If it was just a quick detour, maybe I’d pick a few flowers, sure.”

Chelsy sighed with relief. “…Huh. You too, Allen… Okay, thanks. Sorry to ask…”

Standing up quickly as she said it, Chelsy put the wreath back on her head, then held her hand out to me. As far as I could remember, no girl had offered to hold hands with me before.

I only hesitated for a second, but her face clouded with worry about me not taking it, so I hurried to grab it. She promptly pulled me up, but seemingly pulled too hard and nearly fell backwards, so I helped her keep balance.

“Are you okay? …Where should we go next? Back to the house?”, I inquired of red-faced Chelsy.

The sky was starting to turn a darker red. It would be dark soon. That would make finding the key more troublesome. I wanted to finish with the outside quickly, but there was still a room in the house I hadn’t checked. I started to feel the slightest impatience.

“Umm… Oh… That’s right. Before you came, Allen, I saw Teacher. He said not to leave the house. But… I broke my promise. …Should we look for him? My grandma’s house is past here. Though it’s kind of a walk…”

…Teacher? Rick also mentioned meeting Teacher in Letty’s World. What was he up to in these Worlds? And if we found him, would he even tell us?

After some indecision, I nodded, and headed in the direction Chelsy indicated. The forest was colored a deep red, almost making it look like it was on fire. The color felt ominous, even, instilling some dread in me.

…At this rate, it was possible something akin to what happened with Letty would happen again. But if I couldn’t find the key, I would be empty forever. That was harder to bear than anything else. …Had I been such a selfish person even when I had my memories?

“It was kind of a walk even just to the garden… Are you tired? Should we rest?”

I’d come to a stop, so Chelsy started to worry about me. I said I was fine, but she stared at me with unbelieving eyes.

“One day, on an errand, the girl broke a promise with her mother and picked flowers in the garden.”

“The girl went to her grandmother’s house with a kind person she met there.”

The moment I looked at Chelsy’s eyes, that voice and pain came into my head again. But I toughed through it and kept it from showing on my face.

“…You shouldn’t overexert yourself.”

Chelsy went behind me again and put her hand out in the next direction to go in. So that I would have nothing else to think about, I focused on her pointing and moved my feet again.

After some walking, Chelsy’s feet came to an immediate stop. In front of us was a big

river with lots of fast-moving water. The water reflected the dark red of the sunset. The depth of the river was uncertain, but this fierce current would no doubt sweep our little bodies away.

“Huh? T-That’s weird. There was a bridge here, and when you crossed it, you’d be almost at grandma’s house… Now we can’t get there… W-What now, Allen?”

Chelsy looked to me with worry. I wanted to do something for her, but alas, I had no idea what I could do. We could only stare at the red stream in our path.

“In a jam?”

All of a sudden, I heard a familiar cattish voice against my back. You again…, I sighed.

“Hellooo, Alice and… Oh! Also Alice!”

“Uh… Me? Um…?”

Chelsy turned around, and I reluctantly followed suit. The Cheshire Cat was looking at us in a cheerful pose.

“…Don’t stare too hard. It’s deadly, y’know?”, the Cheshire Cat warned in a hard-to-read tone. He seemed either displeased or amused by the wary look Chelsy was giving him. She shuddered and shrunk behind my back.

“Juuust kiddin’! Don’t freak. So you wanna cross the river? ‘Cause I could take you over… What’ll it be?”

“R-Really?”, Chelsy asked, peering from behind me.

“But you won’t do for free, will you?”

“Yep… You just gotta play a little game!”, he readily replied.

What horrible and dangerous, or illogical and impossible, things could a “game” with him possibly entail? Whatever it was, I was sure it wouldn’t be simple.

“Hey, now! I wouldn’t be that malicious. Cut me some slack!”, the Cheshire Cat whined, seeming to see through my thoughts again.

“It ain’t even nothin’. Just some fun riddles. Alice there’s great at ‘em, aren’tcha?” He grinned toward Chelsy.

“If I can… answer your riddles, you’ll take us to the other side?”

“Yep! That’s a bona-fide promise. And I don’t break promises, on principle.”

“…Okay. I’ll do it.”

Trembling slightly behind me, Chelsy accepted the Cheshire Cat’s conditions. Hearing it, his mouth and eyes happily distorted further.

“Three questions in all. Don’t worry, ain’t no time limits or nothin’. …So here’s the first one. This guy’s always got a smile whenever I take it. What’s the thing I’m takin’?”

After a few seconds, Chelsy answered. “Um… a photo? Because people smile when you take photos.”

The Cheshire Cat laughed repulsively, which I guess meant she was right. I was surprised how quickly she got it. Thinking about it, I remembered there were riddles in the letters I found in Chelsy’s house. So did Chelsy like that kind of thing?

“Okay, next one. What would you find in a kitchen that you’d never wanna see on a boat?”

“……A sink. Because… you wouldn’t want the boat to “sink.”“

There was a longer pause that time, but the Cheshire Cat’s joyous laugh told me she’d got it in one again. I remained a silent wall keeping the Cat and Chelsy separate, watching over the proceedings.

“Right you are. Gotta say, don’t hate you clever kids. Then here’s the last one.”

Seeing Cheshire with his biggest grin yet gave me a bad feeling.

“What color do you hate the most?”

Was that really a riddle? Either way, once Chelsy answered it, the Cheshire Cat would take us across the river, I mused. But Chelsy didn’t answer as promptly as before.

“…Chelsy?”

When I turned around, Chelsy was trembling much more. Even I faintly felt her shaking as she clutched to my sleeve. She was pale, and trying to voice something, but only a low groaning came from her lips.

I figured there was no way she could answer like this. That must have been exactly what the Cheshire Cat expected. What a jerk he was.

“Red. Chelsy hates the color red.”

She had mentioned not liking the red sky earlier. I was taking a gamble on whether it was

her most hated color, but no other likely possibilities came to mind, so I answered for her in half-desperation.

“Correct! Alright, off on your way. Close your eyes. If ya don’t, this time you really will die!”

I turned toward Chelsy. She already had her eyes tightly shut, still shaking slightly. I faced back forward and closed mine.

I was consumed by a feeling of my senses growing distant, and for a few minutes experienced an unpleasant sensation of floating in darkness.

When I opened my eyes, we were on the other side of the river. The Cheshire Cat was nowhere in sight, but it seemed like he really had taken us across.

“…Oh, we can get to grandma’s house from here. …I wonder if Teacher’s there?”

Chelsy’s eyes were open too. Her shaking seemed to have calmed down, giving me some relief. How could she hate red so much if she wore red clothes? I’d be lying to say I wasn’t curious, but it clearly wasn’t something she wanted to touch upon, so I stilled my tongue.

“…I wonder if mother’s okay. I don’t know how she’s been doing since I started living at the facility, so I’m worried for her. Grandma says that she’ll get better, but the thought that someday… there might be some day she won’t wake up… No, I always did think that, didn’t I…?”

Chelsy lowered her head and mumbled, still holding my sleeve, and began questioning herself toward the end. Were her memories jumbled?

“Allen, is there someone you want to protect?”, she abruptly asked.

I’d been able to recover some shards of memory by going around the Worlds, but it was all still covered in fog. It was still difficult for me to remember anyone who I might have hoped to protect. I meekly shook my head.

“Oh… You lost your memories, huh, Allen. I didn’t mean to… …I’m sorry.” Her eyes clouded up as she looked down.

I said it was fine, and stroked her back, knowing she had a kind heart. She looked up a little and stared at me. I gave a little smile, and finally she appeared relieved.

…Good. I must have done a better job of smiling that time.

Following the path straight ahead, a blue brick house came into sight. There was a large field in front of it, where many plants with names unknown to me grew.

Chelsy gazed at the field and explained. “These are the medicinal plants grandma grows. She told me she had a job making and selling medicine. She says she can make all kinds with these.”

“What kind of medicine does she make?”

“Um… Lots of kinds. Recently, she made a medicine for a disease spreading in a village somewhere, and… She also mentioned something about a, dreaming disease, I think…?”

Dreaming disease? Those words sparked something in my memory. I felt like I’d seen mention of such a disease in a newspaper somewhere.

The facility didn’t get newspapers or have a TV, so all we knew about what was happening in the world came from Teacher. Of course, even that was never anything particularly important, and always restricted to peaceful stories.

“Well, let’s go… We might find Teacher.”

Chelsy tugged me along to the front door. However, when she tried to open it, it just made a thunk and wouldn’t open.

“Huh? That’s weird… And after we came so far…” She turned the knob repeatedly with a disappointed look.

“My, you strange little girl. You do realize you’re only wasting your time with that.”

Hearing a high-pitched voice from by my feet, I looked down to find it. A white mouse was looking up at us.

“Huh? Another talking mouse…?”

“Hrmm? Do you think it strange that I can speak? How rude!”

“Um, miss mousey, do you know how to open this door?”

“Why yes, I do. But it will come at a price.” She snorted her nose at us with a haughty, squeaky laugh.

“Er… What do we need to do?”

“Hm! Yes. Would you part with that crown upon your head?”

Chelsy was wearing the wreath she made in the garden earlier. It seemed to have wilted just a little since making it.

“This? That’s all…? Here you go.”

Chelsy carefully took the crown off her head and placed it on the mouse’s. She snorted with cheer, then unbelievably, stuffed it into her mouth.

“Ahh! Thank you. I was rather starving. And not a single one of those thorned flowers I hate so - I feel magnificent!” She shrilly laughed. It echoed in my brain.

“You hate flowers with thorns? …I think there a lot of pretty ones like that, though.”

“True, pretty flowers may well have thorns. Everyone will choose pretty flowers to decorate themselves with, even at the expense of a few wounds. And once it hurts them terribly, they blame the flowers and discard them,” the mouse said bafflingly in her shrill voice.

“Yet they knew of its thorns from the very beginning. …And didn’t you, too?”

“Huh?”

It seemed like the mouse was talking to Chelsy. She became flustered, not sure what to say in response.

“Well, here you are, as promised. You can open the door with this. It’s heavy, so handle it with care.”

The mouse snorted off to her side. Looking in that direction, I saw a sturdy axe sticking out of a stump.

I turned to Chelsy. “…Huh?” She swung her hands in denial. “I-I can’t carry anything too heavy… Can you do it?”

I picked up the axe, carried it to the door, and gave it a big downward swing. With a painful sound, it made a small gap in the door.

“Allen… You’re pretty gutsy, huh.”

Was that a compliment? I said thanks for the time being, and pushed the door further forward to enter the house.

As soon as I entered, a raw smell came through my nose. The smell made something acidic come up from my stomach and try to escape. I turned down and tried to keep it in.

“Allen, what’s wrong… Ahh…!”

Chelsy suddenly shrieked. Holding my sick stomach with both hands, I looked up.

A mix of shattered medicines and thick red fluids was scattered across the room. A human-like figure was laying on its side on the bed in the corner, and what was surely a monster… a creature covered with scruffy hair was staring at the bed, making a low growl.

“A, Al, Allen, r-r-run…”

Chelsy stepped backward toward the door outside. Yet the door which I’d cut open with the axe was somehow back to normal. Chelsy roughly banged the doorknob, but it wouldn’t budge.

Taking notice of the noise, the beast’s stocky body came our way. Its foul smell and moans further upset my stomach. But it was glaring solely at Chelsy, not me.

“Ahh…! No, no, no! That’s not grandma! Stop, I don’t want to see this! Never again! I won’t do it again… I’ll be good, so please… Forgive me… Let me wake up…!”

Speaking through sobs, Chelsy fell to the ground and covered her face. As if waiting for this opportunity, the beast nimbly ran past me and prepared to attack Chelsy.

“Watch out!”

Immediately, just like I’d brought down the door, I swung the axe down on the beast. A wild howl came out of its mouth.

At the same time, an unspeakable smell filled the room, and the thick red fluids around the room were added to with more.

“Chelsy…”

After the beast finished howling, it fell to the ground unmoving. I held my hand to Chelsy, but she just held her hands over her face and trembled.

“Stop… it… I hate… the color red… Father…”

She kept repeating herself. I kneeled down and looked into her eyes.

“…I’ll close my eyes… So I can’t see. Please… hold my hand.”

Still not looking at me, she offered me a shaky hand. I gently took it with both of mine. Instantly, I felt the coldness of it, and that voice echoed in my mind.

“After the girl fetched some medicine, she returned to her grandmother’s room to find that she’d been eaten by a wolf. The girl was terribly scared and could not move from the spot. Then the wolf drew near her.”

“The moment the wolf reached for the girl, it was cut in twain. Behind the wolf stood her father, wielding an axe. The girl trembled at the sight of the slaughtered wolf and her red-stained father.”

“Afterward, the girl ran all the way back home and locked herself in her room. There was the voice of her father. There was the voice of the girl, too.”

““Father killed a person. But isn’t it me who’s most to blame? Was that father? Was it a person?”“

“The more she thought about it, the more the scene was jumbled in her head. So she decided not to think about it.”

“…The girl renounced having to acknowledge anything.”

…When I opened my eyes, Chelsy was lying on her side. Something was shining in a pool of blood next to her. I gently took my hand away from Chelsy’s… and touched the key.

And again, a nostalgic voice filled my mind.

“What, Allen? You’re going out to the library again?”

“Yeah, I already finished this book, and I really want to read a new one.”

“Hmm. I hear children are catching a disease that makes them never wake up… But you’re always bounding with excitement to read, so I’ll bet you’re safe, Allen. Hahaha!”

“Why, Allen’s been up all night plenty lately, hasn’t he? Please tell him off, dear.”

“When you’ve got something you like, it’s great to get absorbed in it. Off you go, son!”

In the darkness, the scene came back more clearly. This was another one of my memories. I knew the man who smiled and stroked my head.

…That day, I…

Proceeding down the path through the woods, I could see the sky more clearly. Yet the sunlight also relentlessly shone down on me.

“So this is also a memory of before she started living at the facility…”

This was exactly the path to Mrs. Revis’s house, with not the slightest difference.

I received a letter from Mrs. Revis a few weeks after taking Letty into my care at the facility. Following a certain incident, her daughter was holing up in her room and wouldn’t talk much at all. She’d heard that I gave children counsel at my facility and asked in the letter if I could come take a look.

I had been in correspondence with Mrs. Revis’s daughter Chelsy. My mentor was sick, and I was worried for Chelsy, who looked after her mother with much devotion. I recall her being delighted to receive my letters full of riddles. In the last letter I sent, I stated my intent to visit Mrs. Revis, but the Letty incident came up that day, so I couldn’t make good on that promise.

Cliff had planned to drop by the facility three days after I received my teacher’s letter, so I left Letty to him and visited the house. When I knocked on the front door on which a wreath hung, a woman appeared, much weaker than the last time I saw her.

“Ah… It’s been a long time. You’ve gotten bigger again. Or maybe I’ve just shrunk,” she joked. Her smile was the same as ever; she certainly was Mrs. Revis. But her voice seemed less active, and more strained.

“I believe we last met when I entered college, didn’t we? I’m so indebted to you.”

“…You’ve become a fine man. Even if you used to be quite the crybaby at the orphanage.”

“Ahaha… You’re embarrassing me, miss.”

Long ago, my sister and I lived at an orphanage where Mrs. Revis worked. That was where she gave us our names and taught us. When I was about ten, she left the orphanage to raise her newborn daughter, but we still occasionally contacted one another, and she still assisted me at times.

“So then, about your daughter…”

“Right… She’s in her room. The door’s not locked, but she won’t look us in the eye or talk with us. Especially… not my husband.”

“Well, first of all… What exactly happened?”

My teacher’s face clouded when I asked that. After a short pause, she began to explain.

Mrs. Revis often asked her daughter to retrieve medicine from her pharmacist mother - from the daughter’s perspective, her grandmother. A few days ago, she made the same request as ever, but her daughter didn’t return. Just then, her husband came back home, so she asked him to go check on her.

When he arrived at the house, he found it in disarray. At the back of the pharmacist’s room, messy with bottles and medicinal plants, was an unfamiliar man who looked ready to attack his daughter at any moment. To protect her, he picked up a nearby axe and swung it down on the man.

…Luckily, the girl was unhurt, but she ran home in fear, and hadn’t left her room since.

“The man had a big bag stuffed with medicine. Many of my mother’s medicines are rare, so he might have been a thief. Of course, we can no longer ask him… nor my mother.”

“…I read that in the letter, yes. I’m grateful to her as well, of course, so… You have my condolences.”

I lowered my head. She’d told me in her letter that it was too late not only for the intruder, but her mother. She politely bowed in response.

“It must have been terrifying to be threatened by an unfamiliar man… But for her own father to swing an axe down on someone before her eyes, whatever the reason… It may have been much too shocking for a young girl.”

“…Indeed. Could you try talking to her? She strongly refuses my husband, so he’s given up on trying.”

My mentor showed me to her daughter’s room. I knocked and opened the door to find a girl donned in red trembling in the corner of the room.

“W-Who…?”

“So… you’re Chelsy. We’ve talked a lot through letters, haven’t we? Yes, I’m the one who wrote those. Sorry that something came up, and I couldn’t come when I promised. This isn’t actually the first time we’ve met… but it was years and years ago, so you probably don’t remember.”

I spoke slowly with a smile so as not to scare her. She didn’t seem ready to bolt, so I approached to a reasonable distance. Even kneeling wouldn’t put me on level with her, so I sat on my knees.

“Will you tell me why you’re staying over there and not talking to your parents?”

She hesitated for a few minutes, but finally looked to me and started to speak.

What she told me largely matched with what Mrs. Revis said. So she was in shock from her father murdering a person in front of her.

“…That man was very kind. But all of a sudden, he was like a wolf… He attacked grandma, and messed up her medicines…”

She tried to tell me everything that happened that day one at a time. But she stopped like something was caught in her throat.

“You don’t have to strain yourself. …Can you not talk with your father?”

“…I, can’t. Father only comes home sometimes, anyway… I’m sure he doesn’t care about me that much… so, it’s fine.”

As she spoke, big tears began to fall from her eyes. I took a handkerchief from my coat pocket and handed it to her, and she took it shakily.

“If you like… You could come to my place until things settle down. There’s another child there, about your age, who’s had a similar experience. …And she’s a girl, so you won’t have to worry about it just being me.”

“…Really? But, my mother’s sick…”

“It’s fine, Chelsy.” Mrs. Revis opened the door and entered. She’d been listening to us from outside.

“I may be sick… but it’s really nothing major. You want to study, and be free to have fun too, don’t you? Your father said he’ll take time off work, so you don’t need to worry about me.”

“Mother…” The anxiety on Chelsy’s face cleared, and she looked between her mother and myself.

“Take care of Chelsy for a while.” My mentor walked over to Chelsy, held out a hand to lift her off the ground, and lightly pushed her toward me.

“I’ll still contact you periodically.”

“Right. Leaving my daughter to a former student… It feels a bit strange,” she remarked with her usual smile. Briefly, I felt a stabbing pain in my heart.

“Um… It’s nice to meet you.”

Chelsy politely bowed, then grabbed onto my sleeve. “You too,” I smiled, and saying

farewell to Mrs. Revis, I returned with Chelsy to the facility.

“Teacher… You’re sleeping there again? I told you before, you’ll catch a cold…”

Chelsy shook me with her cheeks puffed up. I sat up, looked around, and searched my memory. …I’d fallen asleep on the sofa in the library.

“Ahaha… Sorry. I was being wary, but I nodded off anyway.”

“Geez… You have to be careful! There’s a big temperature difference between night and day this time of year… Oh, here, Teacher, um…”

Just remembering something, she dug through her pockets and handed me a vermilion notebook.

“Bye, Teacher. It’s time to sleep… Make sure you sleep in your room!”, she warned, rubbing her heavy eyelids. Even as she went to leave the library, she kept looking back at me, repeating that I sleep in my room.

“I know, I know, I will. Good night, Chelsy.”

She finally looked satisfied, and replied “Good night.” With a leisurely gait, she returned to her room.

I took a breath, and ran through what I knew about her in my mind. She’d periodically gone to get medicine from her grandmother’s house, and her mother warmed her not to take any detours.

Yet that day, she had gone to pick flowers from a garden. When she did, a stranger came up and talked to her. She was wary at first, but as they talked and he held her hand, she felt he wasn’t a bad person. Maybe the loneliness brought about by her father rarely coming home made her feel that way.

Afterward, the man said he’d come to visit her grandmother’s house to buy some medicine. However, he lived in town and had never been in the forest before, so he got lost. Chelsy thus decided to escort him to grandma’s house.

The story after that, I heard the same way from Mrs. Revis and Chelsy. I was hung up on the fact that the man seemed to abruptly change, attacking her grandmother and trying to steal her medicine. There had been many similar incidents lately. Though in this case, we heard nothing from the culprit…

“…I’ll need to gather more information.”

I stretched, and once again returned to my desk.

While recalling the events of taking Chelsy to the facility, I walked through the forest, and soon found a place similar to the garden I had passed through on the way. However, unlike that garden, this one didn't have any out-of-place flowers blooming without regard for the season. I sat carefully to not crush any flowers and calmed my breathing. And I recalled the first page of the notebook she gave me.

Teacher, I… still can't forgive father. Those eyes… that color… I'm scared. …Help me.

If she could recover from the shock of that incident, would she be able to live there with her family again? It wasn't inconceivable. But there was no reason for her to move back yet.

"…What?"

I heard the same rumbling as in Letty's World, and the ground began to shake. The surrounding plants quickly grew like a fast-forwarded video, encircling me.

Was this… the World collapsing? Ah, not again…

I had a feeling this might have happened. Yet, I hadn't thought in the slightest she would break her promise. Before I could solve that, green vines and oddly-shaped leaves began to coil around me, and I was swallowed up.

3

"Welcome back. …I say with a smile, but I'm made quite uncomfortable by that face you're making," the White Rabbit said with irritation. "Ah, well, at least you seem to have safely recovered the key. I can't complain about that."

"…Is there no way to save the people in those Worlds?", I nervously asked the increasingly irritated Rabbit.

"Ah… Well, you do that by not entering their Worlds. No matter how much care taken, a person's heart will inevitably be hurt by any other, won't it."

The White Rabbit folded his arms and began to tap his elbow with a white finger.

"Just think about it. Having the locks to hidden parts of yourself forced open. …The doors in the Worlds are there to keep those places locked up. And having sticky hands upon what you never wanted touched… Unpleasant even for you, yes?"

I silently listened to the Rabbit. …So the moment I entered a World, even if it was entirely unconscious, I was hurting them.

"…Oh, it's quite all right. I'll handle the rest. Never mind the Alices. Focus on the keys, please." He grinned eerily. It might have been the first smile I'd seen that didn't feel kind. I left the White Rabbit and headed for the third door.

The memory I got when I touched the key… It was breakfast that day. My father, reading the newspaper and munching on bread as he talked to me. My mother, warning me not to stay up so late. Me, smiling at both of them. It was surely the memory of that day I'd lost.

Seeming to regain a few emotions as I regained memories, I hesitated to go to the next World. Even moreso after what the White Rabbit told me. I didn't want to hurt anyone any more.

"Sure that's not "don't wanna be hurt"?"

The Cheshire Cat was suddenly standing behind me. This cat was everywhere, I tell you.

"All people're like that. They say just say what you want, but when you say anything bad, you got a knife at your throat. Yeesh, so what am I supposed to say!"

Doing a droll dance, he tilted his head at me. My discomfort began to clearly surmount.

"Ah, that's it. Sayin' nothin' must be best, like you do. But if you don't know a thing, you wouldn't even have the thought, wouldja?"

…Was he putting me down for trying to get back my memories?

"Pesky knowledge just dirties the heart. Trying's the first step toward exhaustion."

"…There might be a way to help them."

I was starting to grow a sense of rebellion. If I let myself keep getting rejected like this, I might just break eventually. I was scared to forget, or otherwise lose, myself again.

"Mweeheehee! I know Rabbit told you the cold, hard truth. But you still gonna keep going? Boy, you're just like him. He ever teach you that one?"

He? Teach me?

There was only one person I could think of he would be referring to. Someone very close, who Rick and Chelsy had claimed to see in the Worlds.

"…You mean Teacher? Do you know him?"

“Sure do! I got some promises goin’ with him, hence what I’m doin’… Whoops, it’s time! We’ll talk later.”

I hope later is never, I thought - but the Cheshire Cat’s last comments bewildered me.

…The Cheshire Cat made promises with Teacher, and was working with him? What objective did Teacher have in going into the Worlds?

I didn’t know what Teacher was thinking, but from Cheshire’s remarks, I could bet that he was already in the next World. I’d have to open the door to confirm that.

My earlier hesitation was suddenly gone. Bad as it felt, I had no choice but to take that cat’s claims as truth.

I put my hand on the third door’s knob. Without delay, I forcefully twisted it open.

4

“Is that true?”

“Yep! There’s definitely somebody else in the Worlds ‘sides you,” the Cheshire Cat replied with a full smile.

As I thought, there was. It would be extremely bad to let them keep walking around, destroying the Worlds freely.

So then…

“…I’m going ahead.”

Passing by the laughing Cheshire Cat, I opened up the closet door.

My mother has a very weak body.
So I do the cooking, washing, and other chores instead of her.
My father isn’t home much.
Sometimes he brings home a wolf or a deer.
I want to go to school, but I love mother, so I always stay at home with her.
Mother always lies in bed, saying, sorry, I’m sorry… And her voice always sounds like it’s about to fade away.

My grandma in the woods had a job making medicine.
When my mother ran out of medicine, I’d go to grandma’s house.
One day, mother told me to go there like always.

“Today, I have something for you to deliver too, since I’m so indebted to her.”
“It’s full of bread and wine, but you’re not to eat it along the way.”
“Like I always tell you, don’t stray from the path.”
“Because there are scary wolves.”
I said I’d do what she said and left the house.
While walking through the forest, I found a pretty flower garden.

Don’t stray from the path, I warned myself.
But I was sure grandma would be glad if I could bring her some flowers too.
So I picked a flower or two.
Then a man came by and asked if I knew a medicine-maker.
He must have meant grandma.

I told him I was going there too, so he should come with me.
The man smiled, and helped me pick flowers.
Then we held hands and walked to grandma’s house.
I don’t hold hands with father much, so it was sort of a new sensation.

We reached grandma’s house, and grandma waved to welcome me.
The man bowed slightly, too.
“The medicine is in the usual place.”
I went to get mother’s medicine from the back room.
Just then, I heard a loud sound. There… there I saw…
…I saw a wolf eat grandma.
Then he stuffed a lot of medicine in a bag.
Then he noticed me, and started walking toward me.

I can’t… look people in the eye. I’m scared to… hold their hand.
It makes me… remember it.
If only… I hadn’t picked those flowers. And hadn’t met him.
And hadn’t… held his hand.
Lots… of blood came out. It smelled… really bad.
Teacher, I’m… still a little scared. But I’m… sort of okay.

Teacher, I… still can’t forgive father. Those eyes… that color… I’m scared.
…Help me.

Alice mare - Chapter 4

Chapter 4: Crying Wolf

1

Just as expected, I again found one of the rooms of the facility through the door. On the desk was homework left completely blank, neatly placed in the corner, and there was a strange poster on the wall beside the bookcase.

“Whoa? Yo, Alice! Nice weather, huh?!”, the person in the center of the room cheerily shouted at me, despite it being impossible to tell the weather with no windows. A boy who always wore a black knit cap with a silver chain, and seemed to treat it very carefully.

“Y’know what this calls for? Y’know?! Y-Y’know?!” Joshua always tended to fire his words like a machine gun like this, but here he was spitting out the same word repeatedly like it was caught in his throat.

“Yeahyeah! Yeah yeah yeah! L-L-L-Let’s play!” At last, he invited me to play, the same words overlapping each other, like a toy with a dying voicebox. In contrast to his unstable words, Joshua patiently smiled wide, awaiting my answer.

I’d go to the World, find the key, and get back another shard of my memory. And I’d find Teacher and talk to him… Now that I had two objectives, I had to hurry, or it’d only get harder to catch up to Teacher, seemingly a step ahead of me.

“Sure, let’s play.” Even I’m not sure why, but my reply came at a loud volume, and my voice cracked in the middle. …Was I just tired?

“W-W-Whoa! Yeah! Sweet! Alright!” Joshua, too, spoke in a voice that overlapped itself, becoming many times louder. “Open up that closet.”

I nodded and walked toward Joshua’s closet. As I put my hand on the door, I noticed I was shaking. What was wrong with me?

I forced my trembling hand onto the handle. And I opened the door with all my strength.

A soft sensation spread across my body. I felt weightless. Upon making the slightest movement, an unfamiliar friction tickled me. Sitting up, I noticed expensive items and furniture all around the large room.

I slid out of the big bed I’d woken up in and gently stepped on the blue carpet. It was large enough to be a living room, but the fact there was a bed here… it probably was a bedroom. And considering I met Joshua before coming here, maybe this was the house he used to live in before coming to the facility.

A side table next to the bed, a big TV by the window, bookcases… Starting near the bed, I inspected everything in the room. What caught my eye most was a chest packed with clothes. In the bottom drawer were a large number of hats just like the one Joshua always wore. Also… some underwear.

I’m probably done here, I thought, heading for the door. It wasn’t locked. It opened easily, and I let out a sigh of relief. I didn’t want to have to force anything open anymore if I could help it.

Outside was a long, wide hallway. I walked straight down along it. I found stairs leading to the upper floor, but some kind of invisible wall seemed to prevent me from going up them.

Giving up on that, I continued down the hallway and found a locked door. After carefully twisting the doorknob left and right to no avail, I left it alone for the time being and turned forward again.

Eventually, I came to a white wall. This was a dead end. Looking to my side, I saw one more door. Putting my hand to the knob with some unease, it easily opened with a pleasant sound that disregarded my worry.

A great number of wall clocks hung on the back wall of the room. Each of these clocks had a different design and a different ticking sound, creating an unstable dissonance. With so many clocks, you’d go mad staying here for long…

“…Hm? Allen?”

Though the clocks stole my attention, someone tapped my shoulder, startling me. I looked down slightly to see a boy starting at me curiously.

“…Joshua.”

“Yep, that’s me!”, he enthusiastically responded to my distant mumble. Good - this was surely the real Joshua.

“I’m glad you were in here. All the other rooms were locked… Have you seen Teacher?”

“Huh? Is anything locked? The other rooms I went to were wide open, and I didn’t meet anybody… But like, is Teacher here?”

It sounded like Joshua hadn’t met Teacher yet. But considering previous events, he likely planned to come in contact with Joshua too. It was fortunate that I got here first.

“Hey Allen, where is this? I just woke up here, so like…”

“We’re… in a dream,” I lied. I wasn’t sure where we actually were, but even I knew this wasn’t just a dream.

“Hmm, yeah, I thought so. It looks like my house, but it’s way smaller!”

“…Your house must be really huge.”

“Sure is. I’ve been having this same dream a bunch lately. But nobody’s ever been around, so I just sit here playing dice. Well, more like I just sit here rollingdice.” Joshua proudly picked up a few small dice and jumbled them around in his palm.

“But if you’re here, Allen, then forget about that. There’s nothin’ here, so let’s go somewhere else! Who knows, maybe some of the others are here too!”

He spoke cheerfully, but my heart ached. Remembering what I’d seen made me feel a sensation like heartburn deep in my chest. At the same time, my ears buzzed.

“There was a large house in a large city.”

“In this large house lived a mother, a father, a boy, the boy’s brother and sister, and many other people.”

“The boy found fun in sneaking out of his large house to adventure outside, then telling his mother of his escapades.”

“Many of the stories were lies, but his mother delighted at them and patted him on the head.”

“…? You okay, Allen? Your face is lookin’ all sour.”

Joshua looked at me worriedly. The competing forces in my body had made me lose balance and fall to the floor.

“…Well, I’ll put you in charge. Just get up when you’re ready and I’ll come along.”

“It’s fine. I think I’m just a little sleepy.” I rubbed underneath my eyes. I did that all the time whenever tears came, so it tingled a little. I lowered my head so he wouldn’t notice that, at least. Then I told Joshua “let’s go,” and left the room full of clocks back to the spacious hallway.

“In one of the dressers in the room I woke up in, I found a bunch of the same hats you wear… Don’t you ever wear any other hats?”, I asked as we came to a wall and turned back around.

“Huh? Well, if there were lots of hats, that’d be my room. See, this hat’s got the secret power of the cosmos in it, so it’s gotta be this kind or else…”

“What about the underwear that was with them? Do you put that on your head, too?”

“Not on my head!”

I tried to move the conversation along as Joshua started getting cocky, but was sharply countered. Still, there were traces on his face indicating he was enjoying it.

“Truth is, this hat’s the first present I ever got. People always tell me they’ll buy me some others, but I just like these ones best.”

“…A present from who?”

“Huh? That’d be, uh… Man, who was it?”

Joshua came to a stop and twisted his neck. After a while, he just shrugged, mumbled “Well, anyway,” and resumed walking.

The hallway felt longer than the first time I went down it. I didn’t see the doors I’d passed by - it was just long white walls. It gave me the illusion of somehow being lost, even though it was only a straight path.

Tiring of talking, Joshua silently followed behind me. Just as I was about to get anxious, the dazzling stairs, which had been blocked by an invisible wall before, appeared before us.

As I put my foot on the first step, I felt something heavy weighing on me. Getting to the second was something I just couldn't manage to do. Meanwhile, Joshua passed me by, climbing the steps with ease.

"Huh? Allen, are you playin' around or something? What, can you not climb stairs?"

Slightly spurred by his remark, I forced my leg to the second step. The mysterious weight on me had gone away all of a sudden, so this time I climbed too hard and fell face-first.

"You okay? Don't overdo it, man." Joshua held his hand out to me. I took it with some hesitation. Just like with Letty and Chelsy, it was colder than usual.

Upstairs, there was a hallway just like the one below that seemed to go on forever. Having already walked long enough, fatigue swept over me like a wave. I really didn't have much stamina, though I felt like it was considerably better here than in the real world.

"…Hey, you said this was different from your house, but… Do you think you have at least a general idea of where things are?"

"Hm? Well, if that's the most you're asking… Yeah, I think I do."

I'd soon collapse if we kept walking around aimlessly. I tagged out and had Joshua lead. In mere minutes, we found a door. Joshua turned the knob without any hesitation, and the door went without resistance.

The room contained furniture even more expensive-looking than what I'd seen in Joshua's room, rows of super-tough-looking swords and such, and a portrait of someone hanging around the middle of the back wall. It was an aged man whose mustache gave a highly dignified impression.

"Oh, this is my dad. He gets real scary when he's angry," Joshua explained as I stared at the picture curiously. I supposed his sharp, olive-colored eyes did resemble Joshua's.

"He buys lots of stuff, and moves the old stuff to unused rooms. Look, like this sword."

Joshua lifted up one of the swords in the corner in his hands and brought it over. The blade was so polished as to reflect your face, and it glittered from the lights in the room.

"…Awesome."

Joshua met my earnest comment with a mischievous smile.

“Back… Back, Back, Back.”

Suddenly, I heard a muddled voice from behind me. I turned around to see a… person? I couldn’t even be sure if it was a creature - like a body turned inside-out and stitched together, muttering the same thing repeatedly.

“What’s with this guy?”

“Back… Front… Back Back…” It stared at Joshua’s hand.

“This? You want this? Sure, I’ve got plenty.” Joshua handed one of the small dice he was holding to the body. It held the die and stared at it, rolling it in its hand.

“Back of One… Six. Back of Three… Four.”

“Yep, when you add up the opposite sides of a die, you always get seven. Neat, huh?”

Joshua seemed to be treating this bizarre body like it was extremely ordinary. The inverted body had blood vessels running along its insides-made-outsides, which I found a little frightening.

“Back… You Back? Back? Back… Back?”

The body suddenly asked Joshua a question. But both he and I tilted our heads, not understanding its meaning. As it went on repeating “Back, Back,” I began to feel a bottomless dread and left with Joshua to go somewhere else.

A few minutes of walking later, Joshua found another door. When I was leading, it took me twenty or so minutes to find a room - but I felt like if I said that, Joshua would just give me a strange look.

“…Huh? Isn’t that Teacher?” His hand came to a stop with the door half-open.

I looked through the gap; a familiar person was sitting on a chair in the back of the room, faced away from us. We shot a glance at one another. He still didn’t notice us as we tiptoed quietly up to him.

The two of us poked his back and messed with his hair for a while, but Joshua soon tired of the utter lack of reaction and punched Teacher in the hip. It sounded like a pretty light one, but Teacher wailed like it was a fatal blow and slumped over on the desk in front of him. Hope he’s okay.

He turned around, his gaze going to Joshua, then to me. “…Joshua… and Allen? I know I

keep telling you, Joshua, but would you stop hitting me on the hip so forcefully?"

Teacher looked slightly surprised when he looked at me. Then he seemed to go into thought, but soon nodded in agreement to himself.

"No hips? What about the flank?"

"It's… not an issue of where you're hitting me," Teacher responded with a wry smile, then suddenly looked worried and rushed to cover his flanks.

"Teacher, why are you here? Not often you show up in my dreams."

"…It's not quite a dream. You must be cautious about your actions here."

Teacher readily denied that this World was a dream. So he does know a thing or two about these Worlds, doesn't he?

"Then what should we do, Teacher?"

"It would be best if you stay put in this room. …Don't go opening any more doors."

"…So then…"

"Ahh, I need to get going. You'll do what I'm asking, won't you?" Teacher hurried to interrupt me and looked us in the eyes. Joshua turned his head to the side.

"Yeah, don't worry, Teacher, I'm here! Uh… You can take it easy breezy!"

"…It's the times when you speak with such confidence that get me most worried. Well, I hope I can trust you."

Teacher slowly stood up and passed us by to leave the room. Ultimately, I hadn't been able to clear up any of the mysteries about Teacher. My chest felt hazy.

As soon as Teacher was out of sight, Joshua pouted with boredom. "Hmm, not much to play with in this room, though…" He appeared to have a desire to go along with Teacher's order not to leave the room.

"Oh yeah, but there should be a…" Remembering something, he ran over to a bookcase in the corner of the room and fished around in a gap between the shelves and wall. A few seconds later, he pulled out a silver gun.

"Russian roulette! Let's play it!"

"Russian roulette…? Like, where you put a single bullet in a gun and take turns firing at your head?"

Did people in rich families play games of life and death starting from childhood? Having lost my memories, I had no confidence in my knowledge of the past, but perhaps I was a born commoner, as I couldn't comprehend such a game.

"No, no! The real deal would be too dangerous. This is a really well-made toy. You put a paintball in here, and if you lose, a needle pops it out and breaks it. We can play like that, right?"

"…Sure." I finally understood once Joshua gave me the explanation. It was still a mischievous kind of game either way, though. It sounded like your clothes would get paint on them, so I wasn't too keen, but Joshua got increasingly desperate until I gave in. He happily put the paintball in with experienced motions.

"Alright, there's six cylinders! And there's a pink paintball in one of them! Here, Allen, you can start. Say how many shots you're gonna fire first!"

Joshua tossed me the gun. I managed to catch it, though it nearly slipped out of my hand. I stated "three shots," and pulled the trigger - click, click, click.

"Ooh, three shots? Not bad. I'll do one." He pulled the trigger once.

There were two shots left, so if I shot once and it didn't fire the paintball, I'd won. But after doing my three shots, I realized something, and had a premonition that I'd lose. Lowering my head a little to keep my clothes from getting dirty, I said "one" and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

The magnificent pink blood splatter dyed my hair. The spot the bullet hit stung a little.

"Aw, too bad!" Joshua thrust a hand in his pants pocket and grinned teasingly.

"…Come to think of it, you didn't spin the cylinder after putting the paintball in, Joshua."

"Hm? Oh, right! So I knew exactly where it was, yeah. But Allen, you should've said that while you had the chance!"

He showed more of his white teeth. I was glad to see Joshua enjoying himself, even if it was at the expense of my hair. I found myself cracking a little smile, too.

"Well, we gotta clean up. Here's a towel. It should come off without too much effort."

Joshua handed me a fluffy white towel; I'm unsure when he got it. Then he took out a second towel and began to carefully wipe the paint splatter on the floor.

“…Sometimes my sister and brother play with me too. But usually they’re too busy with studying to play anything. So I’m glad to finally get a chance to again. …Even mom and dad have been kinda restless lately, won’t pay attention to what I’m doing at all,” Joshua remarked as he cleaned.

“My brother’s real great as soccer and stuff! And my sister always gets the best grade in the class on hard tests. …But I’ve got nothing.”

Joshua spoke cheerfully of his brother and sister, but when he came to him, he bit his lip tight and turned his head down.

“I think you’re really interesting, Joshua. You talk about all sorts of things, and play pranks… I mean, sometimes they go a little too far, but you’ve got a great imagination.”

Joshua’s face lit up, and he looked toward me.

“Allen… You’re saying I do? I’ve got something?” He shyly turned away again. But he looked less pained than before; somehow, he looked liberated. Good, he got a little more of his cheerfulness back.

“Well, we played Russian roulette, so there’s nothing else to do in this room. Aw, well… Telling me to stay put makes me not wanna stay put! Let’s go somewhere else!” Joshua folded the dirty towels, put them on a nearby table, and dragged me by the hand.

Teacher’s warning not to open any more doors replayed in my head. His voice was gradually overtaken by noise, turning into an unpleasant ringing.

“One day, lightning struck, and father’s castle was ruined.”

“The castle crumbled, there was no money left. And the last time the boy saw his father, he was floating in midair.”

“The boy informed his mother. But his mother said this:”

“What are you saying, at a time like this?! We’re all very exhausted right now. Don’t tell me such lies again.”

“The boy tried to lead his mother to father again and again, but she let go of his hand every time.”

“What’s up, Allen? …Sorry, does your hand hurt?”

When I came to, Joshua let go of my hand and looked at me anxiously. I looked toward him to say I was fine, but for some reason, he quickly averted his gaze. Then, with a

relieved expression, he put his hand on the doorknob.

…I wondered if Joshua had always had trouble looking people in the eye.

“What’ll it be? …Go? …Or not?”

“…Let’s go,” I answered firmly, though after a slight pause. I had to go. I’d resolved to do that before I came to this World.

I had a feeling about what would happen now, and what I’d witness. And yet I couldn’t stop moving ahead towards it - maybe I was already starting to break.

As Joshua continued to give me worried glances, he opened the door and went into the hallway. And we resumed walking down the long hall again.

After walking about ten minutes, we hit a white wall. A dead end.

“This is the only door, I guess. Honestly, they should be more… next to each other, y’know?”, Joshua illustrated by spreading his hands to his sides, looking a little disappointed. Then without delay, he opened the door.

Instantly, a sweet smell wafted out from the room. Looking inside, I saw two white shortcakes on a table in the center, topped with little strawberries.

“Ooh, these are the cakes dad buys every time he comes home. They’re made by some kinda famous… patissy… cake maker person, and they’re really good. Awfully sweet, though.”

Joshua approached the table. I followed, and the strengthening smell of the cakes stirred my appetite.

“Hey, Allen, don’t eat with your hands. Your clothes’ll get all sticky…” Joshua went searching underneath the table. “Uh, here, here’s a fork.”

Why there was a fork there, and how he was able to find it… I had no desire for answers to those questions in the face of this sweet temptation. However, just as I was about to grab the fork from Joshua…

“Baaa.”

From underneath the table, I heard a weak voice. And I saw the face of a sheep-like creature with lots of fleece and great curly horns.

“What, you want some too? Well, human food isn’t good for animals a lot of the time, so I wouldn’t suggest it.”

“Baa, baa…”

“…Fine, I give. The strawberry’s probably fine.”

I couldn’t understand what the animal was saying, but Joshua seemed like he did. He took the precious sole strawberry off his cake and tossed it to me. The sheep-like creature skillfully snatched it up from midair and baa’d pleasantly.

“We should eat too. Walking’s tiring, so we can rest here.”

Joshua put his fork in the long triangle-shaped shortcake to cut a bite-sized piece. Then he stabbed it with the fork and went to bring it to his mouth.

“…Are you gonna eat? You not like sweets, Allen?”

“Nah, I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

I cut my shortcake - more crudely than Joshua did - stabbed it with the fork, and brought it to my mouth. The moment I put it in, I was hit with an extreme dizziness.

“…Hey, Allen! Hello? You okay?”

A voice calling me from afar grew gradually closer. When my senses cleared up, I saw Joshua looking at me from above worriedly.

“I’m fine… Huh? This isn’t where we were…”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. I got all dizzy and fell asleep, too. When I woke up, we were here,” Joshua explained, rubbing the back of his head. Was he hit there and knocked out?

I had a look around, and only one thing caught my eye. Red curtains swaying slightly, giving off an ominous air. Occasionally, pitch darkness stared at us through the gap.

“…Man. Was there a room like this?” Joshua’s head tilted. He seemed restless, and very attentive to the gap in the curtains.

“It occurred to me when we were talking about the voices upstairs too, but… Do you not like scary stuff?”

“Huh? No! I’m not scared! It’s just, when you’ve got gaps and stuff… Doesn’t it feel like somebody’s staring at you through ‘em?”

Wasn’t that a roundabout way of saying he was scared? I threw the curtains open. There was only darkness behind them, not a sign of any light.

“…You’re going in? Wait, does this go somewhere?”

“There doesn’t seem to be much of anywhere else… Look, I’ll go ahead. That won’t be so scary, will it?”

“No way! Wrong idea, Allen! I am not scared! …But yeah, you do that.”

Joshua swiftly got behind me and clung to my clothes. I carefully set foot into the darkness.

“…”

As we walked around blindly without saying much, Joshua suddenly came to a stop.

“What is it?”

“Oh, y’know. I’ve got this strange feeling. Like I’m missing something…”

“Missing… what?”

“I don’t know. And my chest feels all fuzzy, ‘cause I don’t know.”

He gripped my sleeve more tightly. He’d been pulling on my clothes in surprise at numerous unseen things, so they were starting to get loose and worn.

“Allen, you have anything you’re scared to lose?”, Joshua suddenly inquired.

Having lost my memories once and gotten some back, I figured I’d be scared to lose them again. Yet I was unsure, because I wasn’t confident that these really were my memories. Such thoughts made an unknown emotion well up in me, while I sank deeper.

“Oh -” Joshua seemed to remember something. “…Sorry, Allen,” he apologized sadly.

“It’s fine.” I resumed walking with Joshua in behind.

“I used to hate the dark. But now, it’s kinda relieving. …I can’t see anything, and nobody has to see me,” he mumbled in an uncharacteristically quiet and weak voice.

While I puzzled over how to respond, my hands found something in front of me. Touching it all over, I identified it as a wall. Following it for a while, I came to an obstruction - a doorknob.

“…You gonna open that?”

The sudden voice at my back made me jump. Sweat started to run down me.

“…Why wouldn’t I?”

“Just… I dunno, a gut feeling. Not so much that I don’t wanna go in, more I don’t want to let you in… I don’t really know either, but… You’re going in?”, he asked again.

I had a feeling - no, I knew for certain what was behind this door. Would I still try to open it regardless?

“If you’re going in, Allen, that’s fine,” he said, leaving me the decision. My half-regained emotions proved to be shackles stopping my hand from opening the door.

…Why did I have to feel this way?

“Then I’ll help!”

“Huh?”

Hearing a voice, someone pushed me. At the same time, the doorknob was twisted open, and we were sucked into the room. We fell forward, Joshua landing on top of me. The room was slightly brighter than where we’d just been.

“Oww… Should’ve told me when you were going to open it, All…” His objection was cut short.

Feeling something was wrong, I pushed Joshua off of me and sat up. Even though I pushed him fairly forcefully, he continued to stare up, dumbfounded, trembling.

I followed his gaze to a large doll-like object hanging from the ceiling. Though there was no wind, the body slowly swayed back and forth.

“Click? …Clack!”

I heard another voice, not Joshua’s, at my ear. Yes, the voice I heard before being pushed. Nothing but the Cheshire Cat could produce this voice.

“Now, what are you doing here? Weren’t you told to stay away, Alice?!”, the Cat reminded Joshua with a detestable smile. But he showed no reaction to his words, only staring up and trembling.

“Hey, you sleepin’? …What, you that curious about the doll hanging there?”

Joshua finally responded as the Cheshire Cat persisted. “Huh? …No, that’s mom. This is mom’s room. Wait… No, wrong, wrong, wrong! That’s not my mom…” He went pale, his

expression warping into one I'd never seen.

…That hanging doll is his mom?

"Hmm? Seems like this Alice sees somethin' different…"

"N-No, no, no… Mom doesn't have those eyes…"

"Ohh? Well then… which eyes? …Tell me, why don't you!" The Cheshire Cat approached Joshua and threw his arms open.

Instantly, human eyes of various colors opened up all around the room, on the walls, on the furniture, staring at us. I couldn't help but yelp at the sudden attention.

"!!!!! Ahh…! Hey… You gotta be… I mean, the one hanging in the air, it was… Hey, Allen!" Joshua grabbed my arm tight. "This is wrong, yeah? It's not right…"

As Joshua looked at me with desperate eyes, his face started to blacken, falling apart like mud. The mud fell and stained his clothes. I could only shake my head in terror at the scene.

"Why… are you looking at me like that? Why… did eye have to see this…"

"Now what's this about, Alice? You tell all those terrible lies for attention, and this is what you get. And trust me, goin' down the "if-only-I'd" route is just a waste of time."

Seeing Joshua breaking down, the Cheshire Cat's eyes further narrowed with joy. I felt both a vomit-inducing disgust and something close to anger.

"STOP iT!! …stop."

Just as Joshua said this, his movement came to a sudden halt. I reached out toward him, worried he might have died. Just then, pain pierced through my head.

"After some time, the boy's brother and sister led their mother toward where father was."

"When I say it, you say it's a lie. Why? Is it because they have something, and I have nothing?"

"Did you know they were all lies before? Is it okay if you don't know they're lies?"

"…The boy renounced having to improve himself."

"Aww, thought I could get a bit more fun out of that… But he's already gone."

That voice brought me back. The Cheshire Cat sounded distinctly more bored than before, his smile lowered, letting out a big sigh. He stepped away from Joshua and looked up at the ceiling.

“You only see it as a stupid-huge doll too, don’t you? Yeah, you’d be right. Don’t worry, you’re not nuts or nothin’. I just cast a special spell on that Alice.”

The Cheshire Cat spoke like a wizard from a fairy tale, but the facts were far crueler. So Joshua had thought his mother had hung herself from that rope…

“I wonder when you might break down? Or are you the one doing the breaking? ‘Cause then much as you hate my guts, maybe we ain’t so different! The things you hate about others, you always do yourself without realizing it.”

The Cat’s remarks stabbed through my chest. For Letty and Chelsy too, I had been the one to open the door. Their ruin was on me for setting foot into their Worlds.

“Oh? Here comes a mousey. That’s the end of this story. Good night, Alice! That was a good dream, wasn’t it? Here, have a present!”

He threw something to my feet. It was a small key.

I gently picked it up off the ground, seeking its help. And I regained another part of myself.

It was a very pleasant spring day, sunny and warm. Having checked out a book I’d meant to for a while, I was elated. I was almost home - I just needed to turn left at the intersection three blocks ahead, then go straight. My pace quickened with my desire to get home and start reading. I arrived at the front door, put my hand on the knob, and pulled it open…

…Something was constricting my entire body. It was difficult to breathe. I heard my heart beat loud. Even then, it was me who opened the door.

…There, I…

2

The sudden change in heat was sapping my stamina. The season had switched from spring to summer. Before me was a neatly-laid red-brick road with a large garden to the side, where it seemed every single flower was carefully cared for.

“I expected as much, but… It sure is hot.”

It was a blisteringly hot day that I went to meet him, too. So this World was from the time I first met him.

Joshua Bartlett was the son of a couple who headed a large enterprise, one of the most wealthy out there. And this large mansion was the managers' estate. I'd have very likely gotten lost if I'd gone alone.

My reason for coming was a request from my friend Cliff, to take a look at Joshua after a certain incident changed him. Evidently Cliff knew Joshua's older brother, who, when told I did counseling for children scarred by incidents, asked if I could check on his younger sibling.

"Sorry, I know you're busy," Cliff apologized with remorse. "Will the kids be okay?"

"I was concerned about the rowdy one before, but the new girl is very earnest. As long as she's there, you don't need to worry. …It shouldn't take too long, anyway."

Following Cliff's directions, I walked up the red brick path to the front door. He knocked several times with the door knocker. Shortly afterward, a rather tired, sort of aged woman appeared, being supported by a young man beside her.

"Yo, Cliff. …And, uh, hello. I'm Blanc Bartlett. I've heard a lot about you… And this is my mother."

After a casual greeting to Cliff and a formal introduction to me, the young man, Blanc, bowed. Helping his mother along, he invited us into the mansion.

The crimson carpet in the hallways gave the place a refined air. Occasionally the suits of armor on the sides of the halls shined in the light. Many reddish-brown doors were lined up in rows against the white walls. We passed by a few servants, who all bowed deeply.

"Perhaps you're already familiar, as it's made the news and the papers… My father passed away the other day. Joshua has been behaving strangely ever since."

"Yes, I've been hearing about it. …You have my deepest sympathies."

A few days ago, the father of this young man and the boy I was about to meet, the head of that huge enterprise, was found hung in his room. It was all over the papers. According to reports, just before he commit suicide, there was some kind of scandal at the company resulting in a loss of faith with clients. It was clear this would be a huge blow to the company's finances, so that was rumored to be the reason behind the suicide.

"It was all so sudden… Our company tumbled as if something were dragging it down. I intend to succeed the position, but there are many worries… Ah, sorry. Here we are."

Blanc stopped in front of one of the many doors in the hallway and knocked. I heard a boy say “come in” from inside.

Inside the room was a silver-haired boy squatting on a small stool. Half of his beautiful silver hair was obscured by a black knit cap.

“Are you the one my brother mentioned? Nice to meet you.” The boy stood up and politely bowed to me. It must have been because of his family, but he seemed very mature for his age. I gave my name and bowed back.

“…Hey, brother, I’d rather be alone with him. It’ll be easier for me to talk.”

Blanc nodded and took everyone but myself and the boy outside, slowly closing the door behind them.

The instant the door was shut, the boy thrust his hands in his pockets and forcefully sat down on the stool. He crossed his legs and grinned mischievously as I watched in surprise.

“I’m Joshua. It’s like suffocating with those guys, huh? Well, you can relax with me.”

Joshua’s shoulders eased up. Ah, so he did have a side more befitting his age. Perhaps his earlier attitude was only fabricated for visitors. Borrowing another stool, I sat down in front of him.

“They keep telling me to talk, but there’s nothing really weird about me. What am I supposed to talk about?”

“Well… I want to know about you, so I’d be happy if you could tell me about yourself.”

“…Me? Well, let’s see. I’m good at soccer, always score dozens of points a game. Also, I love to study, so I get perfect scores on tests every single day!”

While his eyes wandered away, he spoke in an ambiguous way, both bragging and somehow not.

“And? Is there anything else?”

“Also… I don’t have wings, but I can fly real high! I like to sneak out of the house and talk to doves while I’m flying through the sky!”

Whenever he started talking like this, Joshua’s eyes wavered. I smiled at his childish stretching of the truth. Then I got onto the main topic.

“…Do you know anything about your father?”

Joshua briefly shook, and his eyes returned to me. After some thought, he looked away again.

“…I dunno. I mean, it was my brother and sister who found him floating.”

“Really? Who was it who found him first? I’d really like to know.”

He paused and bit his lip. Then he sighed and raised his face up.

“Me. I found him. I was studying here, when I heard a cat meow. I followed it, and heard a creaking sound from dad’s room. So I opened the door. And just when I opened it, dad…”

Joshua’s mouth was shut. He must have seen the moment his father hung himself. “You don’t need to say any more,” I said, patting the boy’s back. He’d started to tremble slightly.

“It must be hard. You might not be able to forget that feeling for some time. …It’s okay. You can take it slow. Thank you for telling me.”

“…Do you believe me, mister? I’m a liar… Even this might be a lie… But do you believe me?”

Joshua looked up at me desperately. I nodded, and his shoulders finally slackened with relief.

“Ah, yes… There are other children who have gone through similar situations. They live with me at my facility, so they can slowly ease their pain.”

“…Oh yeah? So it’s not just me suffering? …Could you take me to your place and make my pain go away too, mister?” Joshua seemed interested at just the slightest mention.

“Well, perhaps I could, but your mother and such would have to let me.”

“…It’s probably fine. Mom doesn’t even look at me, and won’t talk to me anymore. I’m sure she hates me now.”

I took lonely-looking Joshua to his mother, waiting for us outside the room, and told her what he’d said. The young man and Cliff were surprised and hesitated slightly, but his mother quickly consented.

“Then I’ll take your son in for a while. I’ll call immediately if anything comes up.”

I said goodbye to his relatives, and took Joshua back to the facility in the forest.

“Teeeacheeer!”

Joshua hurled a fist directly into my hip. It came so suddenly, I made a strange howl and fell forward.

“Joshua, I tell you again and again, no hitting the hips…”

“But you never notice if I don’t do that, Teacher…” He held his hands behind his head, grinning prankishly.

“…I don’t suppose I can have you behaving like when we first met.”

“Huh? No, no way!” He stuck out his tongue. “‘Cause that was all a lie. The kind of lie that’d get me yelled at if I didn’t tell it.” So this was the real him…

“Oh yeah, here, notebook. I wrote it in like you said!”

Reaching into his pocket, he took out a turquoise notebook. I took it and checked the new pages. The words were written very neatly.

“Thank you. I’ll write a reply and give it back. Now, it’s time for bed.”

“Alright! You do that, Teacher. Good night!”, he bowed. “Good night,” I bowed back. He made mischief, but he always followed rules.

I moved under the shade of some trees in the garden. I let out a deep breath to be finally free of the heat. And I flipped to the newest page of his notebook.

My brother’s good at soccer. My sister’s smart.
But I’m nothing.
I’m nothing, but I said I’m something. I have nothing, but I said I do.
And I got so sad after I said it. Soon enough, I didn’t know what I had, or what I was.
No matter what I say, it might just hurt someone. But I still say it.
Teacher, what am I supposed to do?

He had always kept lying to get his mother’s attention. So when he came to tell her about his father’s death, she wouldn’t believe him. If my information was correct, due to the company’s troubles, she wasn’t emotionally stable at the time. Too many things happening at once had led to that day’s outcome.

Cliff told me that, with Joshua’s brother now taking charge of the company, it was slowly making its way back up. Their mother seemed to be faring better now, as well. If I kept up my care of Joshua, he’d probably be able to return to his old life. …I just had to keep it

up.

Just as a strong breeze blew, a shrill sound echoed, and the shadow around me grew larger. It became deeper, finally turning into darkness which began to envelop me.

…Strange. I certainly told them not to leave that room - to not open any doors. It was hard to believe they would go against my instructions. Especially when Allen, who often stopped Joshua just in the nick of time, was there.

“Boy, this one’s starting to break too! Fragile little things, eh?”

A familiar voice reached my ears alongside the ringing noise. The Cheshire Cat’s white teeth and eyes were floating in the darkness before me.

“…Do you know something?”

“Yeah! You asked me to watch, so I’ve been doin’ that. That Alice opened the door. So that Alice broke down. That’s the whole story!”

The deepening darkness emphasized the Cat’s gleaming eyes and mouth. Whether it was true or not, I couldn’t say, but according to him, it was apparently Allen who opened the door.

“I see… So he opened Joshua’s door?”

“Well, what’ll it be, Alice? There are two Worlds left. Have your plans been thrown out of whack? Or maybe you’re starting to go mad?”

The Cheshire Cat tried to agitate me, but I ignored it all and responded quickly.

“I have a request. Seeing as you couldn’t humble my request to be the only one to enter the Worlds, that’s fine, yes?”

“Sure! I mean, I stopped him. But you know brats, always wanting to do what they’re told not to. ‘Course, they’ll do it if you say to, too… Mweeheehee! Alright, alright, leave it to me.”

As my senses began to fade, I explained myself to the Cheshire Cat. And my body became one with the darkness.

3

“Oh? Your expression is entirely different from last time. …Ah, no, I believe I understand, so no need to answer. Well done recovering the key,” the White Rabbit remarked in a businesslike fashion. I nodded without really thinking much.

“Are you beginning to grow used to the Worlds? …From your reaction, I would wager not. Well, when I first arrived, I too thought, what am I doing in such a place?! Now, I don’t believe it to be so bad.”

“…You don’t think anything of this World, Mr. White Rabbit?”

“Why, there’s not even any need to worry about food. I prefer the World to the world. … But you don’t appear to like it much, Alice. So if you wish to return, I can teach you a way.”

“Really?”

“After you’ve gathered all the keys, that is.” The White Rabbit put on an artificial smile. Contrary to his name, he wasn’t charming or sweet in the slightest. Why did this guy call himself the White Rabbit?

“…I’m simply using “White Rabbit” at the moment, that’s all,“ he replied disinterestedly to my unvoiced question. “You-know-who generally decides my name for me, and I just go along with that, since it’s a hassle to do otherwise.”

“Though I would appreciate if he could stop always changing between this and that. Even my appearance changes to match the name, you see. …Ah, rats, I’m getting annoyed.”

The White Rabbit’s irritation was starting to build again, so I quietly left for the place where the World doors were.

I was being assaulted by thoughts that felt like my lungs were being gouged out. Was it a reaction to only partially recovering my memories and emotions? Or an effect of opening the World doors? No, maybe it was both. Whose fault was this? It was starting to get annoying just to remember the names of emotions welling up in me.

“You gonna blame it on somebody else?” As usual, the Cheshire Cat was suddenly in my path.

“Always just thinking of themselves, yet when they’re unhappy, they’re quick to blame somebody. People are leagues nastier than demons, I’d say!”

With a slimy smile, he swung his hands around. I was too tired to even feel irritation and discomfort toward the Cheshire Cat anymore. Taking everything into account… Yes, he was a demon.

“That’s right, I’m a demon, so’s he. Names are just whatever. We don’t need them among ourselves, you see.”

So there was no real reason to call us all “Alice,” either?

“Yep! I couldn’t care less about your name. That’s why I call everyone the same. I mean, you don’t give names to every ant or frog, do ya?”

To the Cheshire Cat, were we no different from ants or frogs? Surely he was just calling us by a suitable nickname. Whereas I was so desperate not to forget my own name…

“You don’t look like you’re having much fun. Don’t let others drag you down, now. Being trash is the recipe for success here. It’s easier to just go mad,” he said in a coaxing voice.

I’d started to become unsure what was true or not. Started to stop thinking. My head just ached.

“…‘Course, you know anything I say is just a demon’s mumblings. Or are you actually gonna take what I just said seriously? Boy, were you that boring a guy?”

Just as soon as he spouts words to stab at my heart, he offers a hand to pull out the thorns. What was this cat after? Why was he doing these things?

“Why am I doing this, eh? Oh, you don’t know? …There’s nothing so easy as badmouthing people.”

With a reply presented as obvious fact, the Cheshire Cat vanished before my eyes with a strange laugh.

In the empty room, I heard nothing but my breathing and my pulse. An unknown anxiety crawled up my back. To get away from it, I reached for the fourth World door. Already, I no longer felt the sensation pulling at my hair, stopping my feet. What had happened to me?

Just like that, I twisted the knob. I knew what would happen through this door. I just wanted to escape this place, this unease, this everything.

As if being sucked in, my body pushed into the door.

The moon fell. That great big, round moon fell!
When I told mother, she looked surprised, then smiled slightly.
The moon hadn’t really fallen.
It still looked down on us from the sky.
But I liked the face mother made, so I told her all sorts of things.
I saw a big lizard talk, I saw the old man next door fly, I saw a cat swimming in the lake.
Every time I said something, mother would be very surprised, then laugh a lot.
But she gradually stopped laughing.

After that, mother stopped looking at me.

One day, I said that father had gone cold while he slept.
Mother was more surprised than she had been in a long time. Very surprised.
Then she got very angry. But I didn't stop.
Almost daily, I said that father had gone cold.
She was surprised every time, and got angry every time.
I liked it.
Because she'd only talk with me when she was surprised.

I was locked in my room. I mean, I had TV. And I had toys.
But it was different. Of course it was, right?
They'd look at my sister and brother. But not at me.
If only spiders and frogs could talk, I wouldn't be so bored.
Yeah, I was different. …Why?

Father went cold. He really did.
I told mother, but she didn't believe me.
She didn't believe anything I said anymore.
Quite some time passed before my brother and sister noticed,
and she finally realized.
She made a face I'd never seen before. A face I didn't want to see.
There wasn't surprise, or anger, or smiling or laughter.
After that day, mother stopped saying anything.
She was just silent, coldly staring somewhere.

My brother's good at soccer. My sister's smart.
But I'm nothing. I'm nothing, but I said I'm something.
I have nothing, but I said I do.
And I got so sad after I said it. Soon enough, I didn't know what I had,
or what I was.
No matter what I say, it might just hurt someone. But I still say it.

Teacher, what am I supposed to do?

Alice mare - Chapter 5

Chapter 5: Poison Apple

1

After my body was dragged into the fourth door, I slowly lifted it and looked around the room. In the back was a jet-black piano with a majestic presence, and just in front of it stood a girl with an unusual air, not to be bested by the piano's.

"Oh dear, Alice. What is it?"

Long, clean black hair. A white headdress with wine-red ribbons. A black one-piece with a curious design. And last but not least, a piercingly sharp red glint in her eyes. Stella looked down on me, stoic as ever.

"Ah, yes. You'd like to play. Very well. What shall we do?", she asked with a wispy voice I didn't often get to hear. Yet it seemed a little muddier than usual. Was this really what Stella's voice was like?

“…Shall we open the closet?”

Not waiting for an answer, her gaze shot through me. I began to move like her eyes had taken control of my body and mind. Keeping eye contact with Stella, I stepped toward the closet, then bumped my back on one of the handles. Ouch.

Stella quietly looked into my eyes. What feelings was she having? Did she even have feelings? I still had no idea.

My back still to the closet, I fumbled for the handles and grabbed them with both hands. Leaning my body back, I opened the closet.

A cold breeze blew against my skin. Even though I was under a blanket, the chill hit my entire body. Unable to stand it, I hurried out of the bed.

I hadn’t expected to see what I saw. It wasn’t any kind of bedroom; it was an outdoor area filled with stone-like objects in many shapes. It was closed in by black trees which had lost all their leaves, their thin branches swaying coldly.

I got out of the bed and looked around to determine where this was. The stones dotting the area, upon closer observation, had words carved into them, seemingly names.

“Northrop…?”

Was this a grave? In which case this must have been a graveyard.

Just as I had that thought, the usual voice began to talk in my head, along with a painful dizzy spell.

“There was a little town deep in the woods.”

“Many people lived in this little town. They all lived healthy lives without sickness. But it struck suddenly one stormy night.”

“A curse was laid on the forest.”

Putting force into my legs, I managed to steady my faltering body. I had even gotten used to this pain.

There was suddenly the sound of many birds flapping their wings, and I jumped. As far as I could see, there wasn’t a soul but myself in this graveyard. As numb as my emotions were becoming, fear was something I seemed unable to ever forget.

…I wondered what I was afraid of.

I started down the path of stones quietly packed together. Every step I took echoed through the peaceful air. I want to find someone soon. Stella should be in this World somewhere. I found my pace quickening.

The graves were like a maze: on one hand blocking the path, but on the other showing me the way. Though I had to retrace my steps many times, I slowly made forward progress. After a while, I saw an iron-bar door. It was rusty, and felt rough when I touched it.

…I didn't want to open any more doors.

Faced with this iron door, I was at an impasse. But the ends of the bars were so rusted that they'd fallen away, making a large hole. It looked like I could get past if I crawled under. Strangely relieved that I could proceed without actually opening the door, I got down and slipped under the bars.

After brushing off the rocks that pushed into my knee, I got my legs moving again. There were no graves on this side of the door, but instead, dark, thin trees formed a path forward. I followed said path.

"…?"

I saw two shadows up ahead. Walking quickly toward them, I saw Stella… and Teacher. They were both sitting in chairs, and Teacher was combing Stella's hair with a reddish-brown comb.

"Oh. Allen."

Stella noticed me first, her head tilting slightly. Teacher followed, and his hands briefly came to a stop as he looked at me.

"Well, thank you, Teacher. That will be fine. You know, you need to fix up your hair as well."

"No, I'm fine. I just let it grow out since I don't know how to cut it."

"? …Hm." Giving him a dubious look, Stella turned back to me. "It's boring standing around. Come, let's go somewhere. Allen, I'll follow behind you. Teacher told me he won't be moving from this spot."

"Stella…"

“Isn’t this fine? Nothing can come of staying in the same place. What will you do, Teacher?”

Teacher looked bitter, then fell into thought. Then, his face tensing up…

“…You kids don’t really listen to me, do you… I’ll come with you,” he said with exasperation, his shoulders sagging.

“So it’s settled. Well, Allen. Let’s be off.”

The two of them stood up from their chairs and got behind me. Was it okay for not only Stella, but Teacher to leave things to me? Teacher seemed to be silently waiting for me to act just like Stella was, but I still couldn’t wipe away my distrust of him.

“What’s wrong? If we don’t move quickly, we’ll freeze in this wind.”

Stella prodded my back. Come to think of it, this was the first time I’d had seen her have a proper conversation. As I started walking, I talked to her.

“…You’re talking quite a bit, Stella.”

“Oh? It’s not as if I hate talking. I’ll speak if I’m spoken to. It’s only me starting a conversation that’s uncommon.”

“But Joshua talks to you all the time.”

“…He always brings me things I hate. I can’t stand him, is all,” she explained frankly.

Her voice was closer to me than I was used to. I wanted to hear it more, but the cold winds that came through froze my lips. So ultimately, that was the end of it; we just walked in silence, with Stella occasionally pointing a pale finger to guide me.

“There are holes all around this area… Be careful not to trip and fall, you two.”

“You too, Teacher. You seem the most likely to.”

The area we came to had holes in the ground in front of the graves. They seemed rather deep, and we couldn’t see the bottoms.

“This looks just about big enough for me to fit inside,” Stella mumbled, staring at a hole. Her voice felt colder than usual.

“But I can’t even see the bottom… Huh?”

While swinging a hand around in the empty hole, it hit upon something. When I grabbed it, it started to move, and I pulled my hand out in surprise.

"…Bug legs?"

Stella kept her distance from me, feeling uncomfortable. She seemed to not like bugs.

"Stop it. Keep that away from me. …You may have a pretty face, Allen, but I suppose you're a boy on the inside after all. Just like him."

Several bug legs squirmed around in my hand. Stella leaned in to look at them, then backed away further still.

"Uh… What makes a pretty face to you, Stella?"

"I believe she once said your face was pretty like a dead person's is pretty," Teacher politely answered, approaching me. "…I'll take those. It would be bad if you tripped carrying these, Allen."

He held out a hand to me. Teacher was behaving the same as always; our kind teacher who always worried about us. Maybe I just found it difficult to doubt people.

I gave the bug legs to Teacher. His face bunched up as he took the wiggling legs, then he stuck them in a pouch on his waist. Bugs probably weren't his strong suit, either.

Stella was back at my side now, standing there nonchalantly. "…I think we're done here. Let's go somewhere else."

She started to walk. Teacher and I hurried after her. When I was alone, I'd hit many dead ends in the maze-like path of graves, but since meeting up with Stella, she'd been guiding us. All the Worlds I'd been to before seemed to come from the memories of the children at the facility, but this World was just graves everywhere we went.

"Do you know where this is?"

"Graves. When people die, they're buried in the ground, their names carved in those stones."

…After receiving an answer a little off from my expectations, my mouth went shut. Indeed, keeping a long conversation going with her proved a difficult task. I silently moved forward in the directions her pale finger pointed.

Heading forward around the winding rows of graves, we saw a shadow. It was like a spider, but many times bigger than a normal one, and it had no legs.

“Oh? Heyyy! C’mere! I’m needin’ some help!”, it called to us in a deeper voice than expected. I looked to Teacher with hesitation.

“…It’s best not to interfere too much with the inhabitants of the Worlds, but this should be fine. I’ll protect you if anything happens.”

He smiled and pushed me from behind. Vaguely trusting in him, I slowly approached the spider-like creature.

“Ah! Great. Listen, I was dozin’ off when somebody took my legs. I’d look for ‘em, but I ain’t got no legs to stand on! You guys know where they’d be?”

The eight eyes floating on its body stared at us. Spiders’ eyes are actually pretty spine-chilling, it occurred to me.

“…Didn’t we pick up some legs of some sort earlier? Are those the ones?”, Stella muttered.

Teacher pulled the legs out of the pouch on his waist. Instantly, the legs started to squirm gleefully.

“Yeah! Yeahhh! That’s them! Put ‘em on quick, will ya?”

Glancing at Teacher’s face, I noticed he was turning pale, so I said “I’ll do it” and took the legs from him. I neatly attached the eight legs to the spider one at a time.

“Ahh, you’re lifesavers. As thanks, I’ll tell you about a secret place! Close yer eyes!”, the spider commanded authoritatively. Stella had watched this unfold without reaction, but now showed some irritation at the spider’s remarks.

“…No. I hate the dark. And I hate spiders, too.”

“He does seem like a rough sort… It’s possible he’d attack us while our eyes are closed.” Teacher, too, started to look at the spider warily.

“The hell, man! You didn’t even say a word before! Just close ‘em! Quick! Close! Close! Clothes!!”

The spider resented our suspicious looks and repeatedly insisted that we close our eyes. The eight legs which we’d just returned to him flailed around like he’d been dropped in water.

“…Let’s just do what he says,” Teacher told us, closing his eyes. Stella still seemed dissatisfied, but closed her eyes as well. And I slowly closed mine.

My body started to tilt, and I felt space warping. With intense dizziness, my senses were dragged away.

When I came to, there wasn't a single grave around. A cold stone path went straight ahead; dark iron bars ran along the sides.

"…Ah. …I see."

Stella alone seemed to figure something out. I wanted to ask her where this was, but recalling her earlier vague answer to that question, it stayed at the back of my throat.

A little further ahead, we found a fountain full of water. On both sides of it were statues of goddesses with their heads torn off, giving off a very unapproachable vibe.

"…I'm a bit tired. Can we rest here?"

"Yes… Right. Let's take a break."

Teacher and I both agreed with Stella. We went over to the fountain and sat on the rim. The fountain wasn't spouting any water, so the already-present water just rolled slightly. I looked into it and saw my face. Was this my face? The eyes of that other me seemed much more hollow than I remembered.

"Just what is this place? …I know these places. And yet, I don't. And they're pointlessly large. I'm so tired of walking."

"Yes, the paths are quite complex. Easy to get lost."

"…You're the one always getting lost, Teacher. Are you really so smart as that doctor who visits says?", Stella goaded.

Teacher smiled painfully and scratched behind his head. "I'm not that smart, no. There are things I'm complimented for, but I really don't think that way myself."

"Hm. And the books in your room all seem very complex, too. Though I still can't understand them, personally."

Stella straightened her skirt while brushing her clean black hair with her hand. Since her pale skin didn't feel at all lively, she reminded me of a doll.

Stella and Teacher's conversation came to a close, so I resolutely aired the question I'd been wondering. "Teacher, what are you researching?"

He looked at me worriedly, then re-faced forward. "…It's a secret," he said, more darkly

than usual.

“Why can’t you tell?”

“…The things I want to do are always being denied. People who don’t know me very well are very harsh, tell me it’s too strange.”

“And you give up when people say that, Teacher?”

“Yes. Somehow, I found it so persuasive that I gave it all up. And before I knew it, I’d become a very boring person.”

Hanging his head and staring at something, Teacher faintly smiled. “So I’m keeping what I’m doing now a secret from you all. …Because I’m easily swayed. I decided not to tell anyone what I really want.”

I couldn’t ask Teacher anything more. His face seemed a mix of suffering, sadness, all sorts of gloomy emotions. Seeing it up close got something caught in my throat.

“…Well, I need to go. If you don’t want to go further, you two can stay here.”

Teacher was about to stand up when Stella grabbed his jacket sleeve.

“…Why are you always like this, Teacher?”

“Why am I what?”

“Why are you so anxious to go off on your own?”

Teacher’s body froze at Stella’s question. …I wondered in what way she meant it.

After a brief silence, Teacher spoke quietly, not turning around. “I don’t like people to know me. Or to get them involved. I’ve… always been that way.”

Stella muttered “I see” and stood up, turning her head to face me. “What about you, Allen? If you’re tired, you can stay here, as Teacher said.”

“…I’m going,” I replied after a little hesitation. I stood up and wiped some dirt off my clothes, and Teacher and Stella got behind me. Brushed by cold wind again, we headed straight down the path.

We kept walking through the gloomy scenery with Teacher at the head. Then a rotten smell entered my nose, and it made my body ache. I pinched my nose to keep any more from getting in.

“…I know this smell. I’ve met it many times.”

“I see… Then it must be close.”

I wasn’t sure what Teacher and Stella were talking about. Continuing forward silently, we saw a shadow. The closer we got, the stronger the smell became. When I finally got close enough to tell what it was, I stopped in my tracks.

It had the shape of a human. But parts of its body were rotten and caved in, and white bone showed through. I couldn’t imagine them being a living person.

“…What an awful smell. Like a poison apple.”

Stella promptly turned and passed beside it. Teacher hurried to follow, but then stopped and turned to me.

“Are you okay, Allen? …Do you feel sick?” Looking worried, he approached me and stroked my back.

“I’m fine,” I quietly said, and he smiled slightly.

“…Don’t push yourself too hard,” he informed me in his usual kind voice.

We passed by the foul-smelling, formerly-human body to catch up to Stella. She had stopped a little bit ahead, waiting for us.

“…You’re so slow,” Stella said with dissatisfaction. This place, unlike everywhere else, looked like a room from the facility. It was strangely out of place put next to the stone paths from just a moment ago. Behind Stella, I saw double doors.

Suddenly, I felt an unpleasant chill that froze my spine. I looked to my right and left, but saw no sign of anyone but Stella and Teacher. While Stella’s face contorted, Teacher approached the doors, and put his hand on them.

“Allen, Stella. You are not to proceed any further than this,” he declared coldly. He cracked the doors open just enough to fit through himself.

“…You’ve been watching, haven’t you? …Remember our promise.”

Without a reply from us, Teacher went through the doors and closed them again. I went after him, but a large shadow appeared before me and laughed loudly.

“Ahh! Good evening, Alice and Alice.” The Cheshire Cat bowed to us and grinned as far as he could grin. “Boy, gloomy faces all around again! If it hurts, you wanna have me free you?”

“…Would you help us if we asked you to help, I wonder?”

“Naaah! Too much of a pain,” he clownishly replied to Stella, the single eye floating in his hood narrowed. Her feelings of discomfort became more visible.

“…I don’t like him. I can’t tell if he’s dead or alive. And he’s disgusting.”

“Oh, mean! I died a fine death a looong time ago!” A strange answer given with an uncanny pose. Stella turned her eyes away from the cat, and her mouth widened slightly as she noticed something.

“…The doors are gone.”

The Cheshire Cat turned around with a “huh?” to look. Indeed, the doors there were now gone.

“Yep, I’m nothing if not a keeper of promises! And that’s what he asked me to do.”

“…You mean Teacher, don’t you?”

“And if I do? You know, you’re a real interesting one, Alice. Didn’t steal anything from you, yet you’re just like all the other Alices! Guess there was no need to steal, ‘cause you didn’t have much of it in the first place.”

Stella began to ponder the Cheshire Cat’s illogical remarks.

“Just talkin’ to myself. Well, my job’s done here! Sweet dreams!”

As he turned away, the Cheshire Cat vanished from sight. Stella was still tilting her head, having not come to an answer.

“…I don’t know anything about Teacher, or about him. …I wonder… why I have this misty feeling.”

“…Stella?”

“The door is gone. What do we do?”, she asked, looking at me. Her fiery red eyes looked to be getting a little sullen.

“…I’ll leave this to you.” Not caring for my answer, she got behind me.

The doors were gone, but there were still paths to take. Where had Teacher gone? …We had to proceed. Something unseen hurried me forward. I was still unsure of myself. My incomplete emotions ate into me.

Stella was back there, waiting for me to start walking. I felt her sharp glare on my back. Somehow, I could just sense her aura of displeasure. Not wanting to upset her any more, I took a look at the paths to the left and right, and decided to go left first.

The left path took us out to another graveyard-like place. The big difference from the earlier areas was, in the back past the many rows of graves, the presence of a shining black piano. I stopped and stared at the unusual sight, and Stella passed by me to approach it.

She pressed a key. A clean sound rang out alongside the frigid wind. She cheerfully went playing one note after another. Sitting on the small bench, she pressed keys with both hands, starting to play a song. I approached as if drawn in by the sound.

Stella's hands stopped at once, and she turned to face me. "…You can hear it much better here than from over there." Her hand patted the open spot beside her. Uneasy, I sat down there, leaving some space between us. She wordlessly faced the piano again and started playing a different song.

Her playing sounded completely different from hearing it through a door as I had before. It was a sound clear as water, delicate and soft. But a sort of trailing coldness seeped into my heart, so badly scratched by these Worlds. With a sharp pain, a familiar voice echoed in my head alongside the piano.

"Many victims of the curse died every day. But a single girl did not fall victim to the curse."

"Many people felt pity for the girl, who had lost her family to the curse, and invited her to their homes."

"Yet the curse came once more, and the girl lost another family."

"…Pianos really are nice. They don't make any unnecessary sounds."

Coming to my senses, I turned to her. Stella talked to me as her fingers danced on the keyboard.

"People… are always just shouting nonsense. It's just noise."

I listened to Stella's voice and the piano in silence. Maybe even my voice was just noise. Controlled by that strange thought, I got scared to open my mouth.

"Why do you, and everyone else, go along with my selfish wishes? When I can't do anything for you…"

The sound lost its intensity. Stella lowered her head, staring at her fingers as they kept moving.

“I don’t think everyone does things expecting to get something in return.”

“…I see.” Stella quietly accepted my answer. The sound began to harmonize again, regaining its vigor. I let myself be swept up in its wave again.

“You’re all oddballs. Even though you seem dead. You’ve all experienced loss. So like the dead…”

Bwooong!

The sudden cacophony made me jump. Stella had thrown both hands down on the keyboard.

“…I think I get it. …That’s enough. Let’s go somewhere else.”

Stella got up from the bench and began to walk. I stood up to go after her. …“I get it”? What did she get? This time, I followed and walked along with her. We returned to the place that looked like a room from the facility.

“…These are my drawings.”

Stella observed the picture frames hanging on the wall. I was too wary to notice them earlier, but there were eerie pictures placed in thick frames. A sad-looking girl, a green cat, a blue-skinned person and a big circle, a person holding something and looking this way. I couldn’t quite tell what any of them were trying to depict.

“There are all kinds of diseases. Some can make you throw up blood when you die, or turn your skin a strange color, or cause a unique odor. And… some can’t be cured by modern medicine.”

Stella spoke to me while running her finger along one of the frames. Was she recalling something?

“…There was that terrible smell earlier, right?”

“Yes. It’s the smell I’ve encountered most. …A smell that feels almost bittersweet. When it’s a banana-like smell, it’s diabetes. When it’s an apple-like smell… I believe that’s the plague. But… they’re all different.”

She turned away from the picture and walked down the path to the right. I caught up to her and walked at her pace.

“Everyone in my town died of an unknown disease. Well… No, some people willingly took their own lives. But I was the only one who wouldn’t die no matter what.”

“…Are you trying to look into what that disease was?”

“Yes. There are quite a few medical books in the library at the facility. A few of them even have notes written in them in pencil. …I’m fairly sure it’s Teacher’s handwriting.”

Teacher’s writing? Was Teacher looking into some kind of illness?

“Was there anything common between the things he wrote notes on?”

“…Dreams. They were all related to dreams. I’d read most books related to the disease at my town… So it’s likely he’s looking into a dreaming illness.”

A dreaming illness. A current ran through the back of my mind. I felt like I’d seen it in the newspaper, or on TV. Though no cure had been found… I felt like they had discussed the cause of its outbreak. But as much as I racked my brain, I couldn’t clearly recall that memory.

Suddenly, Stella stopped, and I nearly ran right into her back. My heart rate quickened a little.

“…The names of everyone in the town.”

She ran her finger along a large rock with many words inscribed on it. Looking closer, they were all people’s names, covering the whole surface from top to bottom.

“I knew this place. But I said it was different, because every name didn’t get its own grave. That would be much too extravagant. …This grave is the correct one.”

Stella’s finger stopped below a certain name. The name “Northrop” was inscribed there. That was the name I saw on that first gravestone.

“…It’s my family name. Of course, I’ve long since forgotten anyone else who had that name.”

“So your father and mother…?”

“Yes. When I was little, they were cursed and died. Then the next people. And the next, and the next, the next. They all died of the curse.”

Looking just a little lonely, Stella took her finger off the headstone and proceeded past it. I followed.

“And you forgot them? …Could you really just forget?”

“Yes. …Teacher told me that voices are the first to go. I hardly remember any of their voices, myself. …Eventually, all the rest will be gone, and I’ll completely forget them.”

Was that how it worked? If I died, would the people who knew me gradually forget me? …It was a little scary.

“Do we forget in order to move on from that person’s death? …Or else, do we stop caring once they’re dead? I wonder which one it is.”

A large tree appeared before us. Its thick roots sank under water, and countless red fruits grew on its wide branches. They appeared to be apples. Stella approached the tree and took two apples from the branches to hold in her palms.

“I don’t particularly like my own name. Stella, star. It’s perfectly accurate. …All I could do was watch people die of the curse from high in the sky.”

Stella stared at the red apples in her palms with eyes the same color. I felt like she looked much more mysterious than usual.

“I hate living people. …They all just die and vanish from sight.”

“Stella…”

“Teacher… said he doesn’t like his own name, either. Teacher is still hiding something. But I’m too tired to even walk anymore. Allen, I’m sure you still can.”

She turned her red gaze to me. The life had completely left her.

“What we’re missing, what we want… I know. I know why none of you feel alive to me.”

“…What are we missing?”

“When people lose XXXX, they die.” The word was obscured by static. I felt Stella was faintly smiling.

“I should have eaten the poison apple then. …What about you, Allen? If you want to eat with me, I won’t stop you. …Do you want to go, too?”

Stella asked me a final question. What should I do? …It seemed like I couldn’t stop Stella. I would be alone again… but.

“I still want to live.”

I had to go, or else. I wanted to regain all of that XXXX I’d lost.

“…I see. That’s good. That’s who you are, Allen. …Good night.”

Giving me a girlish smile, she kissed one of the apples. And just like that, she ate it. She slowly collapsed on the spot without a sound. The apple in her other palm rolled toward my feet. Right as it bumped against my foot, a small pain ran through my body.

“After losing a fifth family, she met a person in a church who offered her an apple.”

“This apple carries the curse of death. With this, you can go to heaven with the rest of them.”

“But the girl refused. And that person, too, died of the curse. The girl deeply regretted not eating that poison apple. Soon, the girl began to harbor a hatred for living.”

“…The girl renounced having any attachment to life.”

When I came to my senses, there wasn’t a poison apple at my feet, but a small key radiating a faint light. I steadied my breath and touched it.

The scene I saw came clearly into my mind. It even took over my vision and my senses.

…I opened the door. First, instantly, a horrible, nauseating smell made my body convulse. I covered my mouth with the hand I wasn’t holding a book with, trying to keep down what was rushing up my throat.

What was before me definitely looked like my mother and father.

But they were different.

The mother and father I knew didn’t have countless holes in their backs, and red fluids never poured out of them. And they didn’t have such hollow eyes. These weren’t my mother and father.

No. No, no, wrong, wrong, wrong. I couldn’t believe this. This was… wrong…

…Yes, that’s right. When I opened the door, I saw my mother and father, horribly disfigured. I finally remembered that.

My body began to heat up. It hurt. Thrown into the water, my senses were collapsing. I couldn’t breathe. My heartbeat grew louder. …And I quietly closed my eyes.

2

“Did that cat really keep his promise, I wonder…”

Stretching my back muscles, I took a look around. It was my room in the facility. On the desk were a mess of research papers pushed to the side, and two empty teacups.

When she came here, we drank from these cups and had a discussion. Of course, she only spoke a little, then nodded or shook her head to show her reaction.

But the first time I met her, Stella Northrop… it was earlier than this.

I first met her in a little town further into the forest. They seemed to have their own customs and culture there. Not making much of an effort to communicate with outsiders, they were highly self-sufficient; I recall getting many strange looks when I first visited.

It was my friend Cliff who led me to go there. Cliff was looking into an unknown illness that was running rampant there, but telling me he couldn’t go there on his own, he entreated me to come with him.

“It’s just not easy to go there alone. Everyone else is too unnerved to come with me, but I’m sure you wouldn’t be bothered, right? Right? Just for a day!”

“Haven’t you been looking into this for a while? Who do you usually go with?”

“…Grandmother Revis. That is, the… pharmacist who lived in the forest,” he answered weakly and awkwardly. Grandmother Revis, my mentor’s mother, had passed away not too long ago in the incident with Chelsy.

“She gave me a lot of good advice. We thought we might be close to finding a cure, but…”

“All right, then, I’ll do it. But only for the day. I do have the children to look after.”

“…! O-Of course! Thanks, I owe you one,” Cliff said, his face a little brighter.

A few days later, I told the children I’d be away and headed with Cliff toward the town in question. There were no roads to drive on, so we walked along a path rife with vegetation to reach the little town.

As we entered the town, all the people doing their respective jobs stopped to look at us. I saw what he meant about it being hard to handle coming alone. There’s nothing quite so stifling as having this many merciless gazes on you. Cliff’s eyes wandered left and right

looking for something.

“That’s the place. The one I’m always talking about.”

Cliff pointed to a certain building. It looked like a church from the outside, but there was no indication of what kind of worship it was for. Cracked all over, it was a rather unsettling building.

“…It really doesn’t look like somewhere people live.”

“Yeah, it used to be an abandoned church. They patched it up just enough that people could live in it. And the people here are all sorts of religions, so it doesn’t seem to serve as a church now. From what I recall, they gather up children who lost their parents to the illness and take care of them…”

Cliff knocked a few times on the door. Soon, a young woman dressed like a nun appeared.

“Oh, Mr. Cliff. It’s been a while. …Please, come in.”

The woman led us inside. The place had many damaged chairs and pedestals, around which many women dressed as nuns and children ran. As they noticed us, everyone kept their distance and watched.

“About those clothes… Are you just making good use of what was already here?”

“…Yes, that’s right. We are rather insular in ways, so our lives aren’t exactly bountiful, and we just have to use what we can get. …More than ever, lately.”

Sitting in a creaking chair, she told us to sit down too. I took a nearby chair, and it also creaked loudly.

“How’s the medicine working? I can see there are fewer people than my last visit… So I can assume it didn’t work again.”

“Yes… Eight people have died since then. Yet for as much as they suffered in their last moments, they could go more quietly after drinking that medicine. …Still, of course, a few still looked quite pained.”

Cliff bit his lip. This matter wasn’t making much good progress.

“I’ll need to look into it a little more. Though, it’d make me happiest to have that girl’s assistance…”

Cliff turned to the children. Following his gaze, I noticed a girl slightly distant from the others, with clean black hair, pretty white skin, and red eyes.

“She was taken in by another family after her parents died… And when her new caretakers died of the curse, she alone survived. And when she was taken in by another, the same thing happened again… Over and over. All the other children either die with their parents, or are taken from here without catching it at all.”

“So, you think she might have antibodies against the disease spreading in this town? Why won’t she cooperate?”

“…She doesn’t seem to want to talk. The first time I tried to talk to her, she just stared at me and said “You’re no good,” and that was the end of that.“

…I wondered if Cliff had done something unusual. Well, he certainly had a silly side, but he wasn’t that cruel. …Or so I thought.

As I began to ponder, I realized the girl in question was standing next to me. I hadn’t sensed her coming closer at all, so I nearly fell out of my chair when I noticed her there. Luckily, Cliff supported me to keep me upright.

”…You’re… dead. Not exactly… but you’re dead.“

She spoke in a clear, fleeting voice, looking into my eyes. I didn’t quite understand what she was saying, but from Cliff and the nun’s surprised faces, I could surmise she didn’t speak up often.

“Um… I’d like to talk to you. Is that okay?”

“…If it’s you, then fine,” she said, her voice young yet fading. She sat in a nearby chair. Looking at her closer, her facial features looked like a carefully-designed doll’s.

“Er… Do you know if the people who died said or did anything in particular before they died?”

“I don’t know. They all just did what they liked. Then suddenly, they coughed up red blood and collapsed. That’s all there is to it.”

“If there’s no common thing, then maybe there’s not just one cause? Or else… maybe it takes a while to emerge? Do you eat anything besides what’s grown here?”

“…”

The girl didn’t answer Cliff. He sighed with a regretful smile. She really only intended on talking to me. Though I couldn’t say I understood why yet.

“…Well? I can ask her instead.”

“Right… Well, don’t ask that, ask if we can have a sample of her blood. Can you do that?”

“We’d like to have a little bit of your blood. We’ll have to use a needle, but… Is that fine?”

“…Do what you like.” She held out her thin white arm.

Cliff quickly prepared and began extracting a small blood sample from her. She didn’t move a muscle as she watched the process. After that, we talked a little with the women dressed like nuns, then decided to leave for the day.

“Come to think of it, you didn’t come with that old woman this time.”

“Huh? Oh, err… She’s busy today. I had to get my friend here to come on short notice. He runs a facility that takes in children with nowhere to go, much like you.”

I was surprised to suddenly be getting introduced. It wasn’t exactly favorable for Cliff to say so much about the facility either, but fortunately, it seemed unlikely to spread since these people were so isolated. With that conclusion, I didn’t try to stop Cliff, and continued on myself.

“…Strange things have been happening outside this town, too. So I’m taking in children with no parents to care for them.”

“Why, all by yourself? You look so young… But that’s wonderful. Could you tell me where it is?”, the sister asked with a sudden serious look. “…If that’s all right with you.”

I didn’t know why she would be asking, but at any rate, I forgot the way we took to get here, so I had Cliff draw a map. The nun took it gratefully, thanked us, and saw us off.

“We made a huge step there. If I find antibodies, I can save them for sure. But there isn’t much time, so I need to hurry. I’ll be going. Take care of yourself.”

Busily getting his bags in order, Cliff got in his own car parked in front of the facility. I waved until I couldn’t see him anymore, then went back inside the facility.

It was a terribly windy day a few weeks later. I heard someone knock on the front door. Cliff hadn’t told me he’d be visiting. Maybe it was a youngster who bought into the ghost stories and wanted to prove their courage. I looked outside through the peephole. There I saw, warped in a slightly circular way, that memorable girl with clean black hair and red eyes.

I quickly opened up. She held a scrap of paper in her hand, and while her clothes and body

were scratched up, her face was unchanging. I couldn't grasp the situation, but I let her in. Far away, I heard thunder rumbling.

"…What's the matter? Did you come alone?"

She faintly nodded. Then she handed me the paper in her hand. It was the map we'd given that nun the other day. On the back was a new, smudged, hard-to-read note.

"…Take care of Stella for us…? What about the people in town?"

"…They died," she answered feebly. "They all died. Even the living people ate poison apples, and were cursed."

Had all the townspeople died of the illness? And poison apples… Was she saying some took their own lives?

"…I see. That's unfortunate to hear… I still have rooms here. If you want… well, and the sisters seem to have asked me to do this. Will you live here?"

Though distressed by the sudden news, I offered her the invitation. She nodded again.

"All right. …I'll get you some new clothes. Er… Stella, was it?"

"…Stella Northrop. I'd like to have some tea," she stoicly requested, rubbing her little hands together.

The weather was awful outside, and she must have been cold from the freezing wind. I nodded, got her some tea, and then spoke with her some more.

"…"

She wordlessly pulled on my sleeve. She was holding a black notebook. I smiled, said "thanks," and took it from her.

"Oh… How unusual, Stella. You wrote something instead of drawing this time."

"…Yes."

With that, she turned around and went back to her room. It still wasn't easy to converse with her. I temporarily put the notebook in my jacket pocket.

The empty teacups still smelled sweet. I seem to recall she got mad about it being too sweet when I first gave it to her.

I thought back on the only words she wrote in her notebook.

Everyone has the same eyes. I don’t know why. But they’re dead. All of them.
They’ve long been searching, but they can’t find it.
…But Teacher, you understand, don’t you?

…Fitting for her, it wasn’t about herself, but a question directed at me. As she said, I knew better than anyone how things had gotten to be this way. But…

The teacups started to clatter. The World was starting to break down.

“…Only one World left,” I mumbled to myself.

I’d been to four Worlds, but still hadn’t found what I was looking for. If I couldn’t find it in the last remaining world either… it was clear what I would have to do. A conclusion with far more hope for salvation than that worst possible outcome.

My vision became dizzy, and darkness swallowed me up. …Before I knew it, I was reciting that charm to myself.

3

“Ahh, stupendous! All the keys have been returned. How irritating that his meddling ate up so much time.”

The White Rabbit faced me with a mix of joy and irritation. I was unsure how to react, and he sighed loudly, then looked back at me.

“Now, what will you do? I imagine you’re quite tired.”

“…The dream. You said you’d tell me a way to wake up from this dream.”

“Ah, I see. Yes, well, I’ll spare us both the long explanation… and make it simple. There are two ways to link this World with that world. One of them, well… we’ll say it isn’t possible. The other is this.”

The White Rabbit produced from his back pocket a key with a sharp point and a large handle. It seemed more like a knife than a key.

“…You must stab this key into the person you feel is most evil in this World. Doing so will turn them into a door leading to your world,” he explained with a smile. So it really was for stabbing someone with?

“If you stay here too long, remember the Alices are in an unstable state. Left like that, they may soon turn to foam. I’ll open all the doors. So then, sweet dreams. …Ah, incidentally, I am not a person, so that would be meaningless.”

…The denizens of this world must have been able to read minds, huh. I stowed away the key I’d been watching for the opportunity to use into my pants.

And I went to the place with the World doors.

“Yo! Pretty sturdy, this one. You’re lookin’ like a new record! Most kids fall to pieces the moment they interfere with people’s hearts.”

The Cheshire Cat appeared, hood fluttering, as if waiting for me. But unlike all the other times, I saw something humanlike inside that hood.

“Told you, didn’t I? That I’d show you the goods in the hood. ‘Course, I kinda just scrounged up some stuff. Left eye’s from a boy harassed by sheep. Hair, a girl who lost the light. Ears, an black cat abandoned by their parents! Pretty sweet, don’tcha think?”

He pulled off the hood, and it did indeed have a human silhouette. But the sewn-on left eye and patched-together skin didn’t feel human in the slightest.

“Mweeheeheehee! So, the rabbit tell ya how to connect the World with the world?”

“…To stab this key into whoever I think is most evil. But it has to be a person.”

“Yeah, that’s right! And we’re demons. So y’know, I’m gonna tell you another way.”

Cheshire held a black claw right in front of my eye.

“I’m talking a pact with a demon. …I’ll tell you the deets soon as you say the word. So you’re wondering what to do next? Maybe I’ll give ya some hints? What a guy I am.”

He swayed his body, making his finger sway with it.

“One: I told you before I stole something from ya. It was only one thing. Exhausting to steal a bunch of stuff, you know. But I didn’t think that alone would make you such a hollow shell! Rare in this day and age.”

The Cheshire Cat’s eyes narrowed, and he held up another claw in front of me.

“Two: When you stab that key, the target’ll become a door. A door linking World and world. So they can’t come back. It means leaving their soul behind! But I don’t need the outsides, so maybe I’ll give that back.”

With a slimy voice, he put up yet another claw.

“Three: You said that this was a Dream. Since you said so, so it was. ‘Cause what Alice thinks is everything. Yep, a Dream that really tormented you! …Mweehee! So, if it’s a Dream, someone must be Dreaming. Now whose Dream is it?”

I was startled by that statement. There was someone who made this dream…? A possible candidate came to mind. But I couldn’t quite have conviction, as usual. There was a lot I still didn’t understand.

“Now, what outcome are you gonna choose? I’m reeeally lookin’ forward to it.”

His creepy laughter echoing, the Cheshire Cat vanished from the spot. The most evil person in this dream. Would that be the one who created it? And also… my memories hadn’t fully returned.

Sure, I had managed to remember the day of the incident. But other essential things still hadn’t been returned to me. In this World… would I be able to see everything? I approached the final World door and put my hand on the knob.

I want to live. And so, I have to go. I took a deep breath. Hesitation meant nothing to me. We’d quickly return from this dream… all of us.

I turned the knob, and threw myself through the door.

Everyone has the same eyes.
I don’t know why.
But they’re dead. All of them.
They’ve long been searching, but they can’t find it.

But Teacher, you understand, don’t you?

Alice mare - Chapter 6

Chapter 6: Recipient of XXXX

Through the door was, again, a place I knew. The same place where that cat lured me to open that first door - my room in the facility. For some reason, all the furniture that should have been there was gone, with only the closet placed in the middle of the room. …It might as well have said “Open me.”

After some indecision, I put my hand on the closet, just like that night.

…And then, I woke up.

I was in my room as it usually was, with not just a closet, but a desk, chair, and bed too. The closet door I thought I’d just opened was firmly shut. …Was it just a dream?

I crawled out of bed and looked all around. A light blue notebook sat lonesomely on my desk. I walked over there, picked it up, and turned the pages.

God made the world in six days. People forgot XXXX, and the world was scattered. Then God made the World in two hundred million days.

“…?”

I had never written anything in this notebook since receiving it. …Was this someone’s

idea of a prank? It left me with doubts, but not finding anything else that gave me pause, I decided to leave the room.

Outside, too, it looked just like the facility we lived in. The halls that had only an absolute minimum of furniture, making them feel extremely spacious. Perhaps all of that had been a dream…?

“Oh? Hey, Allen. Whatcha up to there?”

I turned to the sudden voice nearby and saw Joshua and Letty standing there, smiling.

“Hey, Allen! It’s cold, huh?” Letty rubbed her arms. “Do you think it’ll snow this year? Last year, we all had a snowball fight! It’d be great to have you join us for another!”

“Man, that brings me back! But I don’t like my hands gettin’ all numb from the cold, so I’d rather play inside.” Joshua kept sticking his hands in his sleeves, doing various movements to keep warm.

“…Do you know where Teacher is?”, I suddenly asked as the two reminisced. They looked at each other and blinked.

“…Haven’t seen him yet today. Probably went out somewhere, or fell asleep somewhere weird.”

“Yeah, I haven’t seen him either. Look around the facility, and you’ll probably find him!”

“…Alright. Thanks, you two. Bye.” I waved, and they returned to their rooms.

Teacher was probably in his room. Considering the Worlds I’d been to before, this must have been Teacher’s World. Or if not… then it was mine.

But it struck me that unlike the previous Worlds, everyone in the facility was living normally. So was that a dream, and this reality…? Either way, I went down the hall to look for Teacher.

“Ah… Allen.”

Outside Teacher’s room, I encountered Chelsy and Stella, the latter wearing a dignified expression.

“Hello. Um… The weather’s nice, huh? It’s really cold, though.” Chelsy breathed into her hands and rubbed them. Occasionally, white breaths reflected off her palms. “…Are you cold? Do you want to borrow a jacket?”

“…Wouldn’t your jacket be awfully small for Allen?”, Stella pointed out, and Chelsy yelped “Ah!” Watching her get flustered, Stella sighed.

“Hey, do you know where Teacher is?”, I asked after the conversation ended. Chelsy’s eyes widened and she shook her head slightly.

“Um… I wonder if he’s in his room here? …Do you know, Stella?”

Stella shook her head repeatedly as Chelsy looked to her. Neither seemed to know his whereabouts.

“…Alright, thanks. Bye.”

Chelsy and Stella said goodbye and passed me by. I knocked on Teacher’s door a few times, then opened it.

A figure was sitting in a chair in the corner, holding a cup of coffee. But it wasn’t Teacher. It was Mr. Cliff, the one who Teacher called his friend, and occasionally visited the facility.

“Hey, if it isn’t Allen.” Mr. Cliff smiled at me kindly. His voice was lively. “What’s the matter? He’s not here, if that’s why you’re here.”

“…The papers are… neat.”

Seeing those papers usually messily pushed to the corner of the desk being actually neatly arranged was such a rare sight, those words tumbled out of my mouth. Mr. Cliff was surprised, then laughed heartily.

“Yeah, he doesn’t clean up much, does he? He can clean the hallways, clean up meals, but when it comes to himself, you know what happens. Same as when he was in college.”

Mr. Cliff put his coffee on the desk, took a breath, and stretched.

“Always been that way. Well, though I only knew him since college. He’s so attentive to other people, but he’s so slovenly about himself.” He seemed really happy to talk about Teacher’s past, which I knew nothing about.

“…You and Teacher get along really well, huh?”

“Ohh! You think so? Glad to hear it. I mean, we did fight just one time… He’s a strange guy, but a good one.”

“You fought?” I was extremely surprised by this past between them. It wasn’t like I’d never seen Teacher angry, but I had a hard time picturing Teacher fighting with another person.

“Well, he’d been writing this book for a long time. I thought it was wonderful when he showed it to me. At the time, there was a newspaper publisher looking for stories, so I submitted it without telling him. It got an award, so I hurried to tell him about it, and he got really mad about me going and submitting it. …I messed up, I know.”

Looking a little pained, Mr. Cliff picked up his cup again and took a sip. The bitter smell wafted over to me.

“It actually got published, too. He told me that was fine, just not to use his name, so it’s under a random pen name I thought up. Have you heard of it? It’s called Nightmare, has a white cover. It’s sold a lotta copies.”

I did know that book. Sales had gradually risen since its publication, and even though it had been years now, that wasn’t stopping - it had even returned to the limelight. I recalled it was a book about a dreaming illness.

“…Dreaming illness…?”

“Yeah, there’s an illness in the book similar to the Nightmare Syndrome that’s come up lately. That’s brought attention back to it again. …Doubt he cares about that part, of course.”

Nightmare Syndrome. Yes, I think even the newspaper my father was reading that day had an article on it.

“What kind of illness is it?”

“Hm? Oh yeah, you don’t have a TV or newspapers here. Well, alright… One day, you just don’t wake up, and instead fall into a deep sleep. There have been past cases, apparently, but there’s been more people catching it than ever lately.”

“…And not just in old people or anything?”

“No, it’s not from old age at all. In fact, it’s always been occurring in children. Doctors, researchers, psychologists are doing all they can to figure it out, but they haven’t even found the first lead to an answer. …Not being able to leave a dream sounds pretty happy to me, though.”

Mr. Cliff looked into the distance. After staring into his empty coffee cup, he placed it down on the table.

“After we got past our fight over the book, he surprised me with a request to help him with the procedure of buying this building, since it was up for sale. Said he had plenty of money to live on from selling his research findings to companies, and he got royalties from the book too. Supposedly this used to be another kind of institution, but they moved

after strange rumors spread around town, so I wondered how that was gonna pan out. Point is, I was really surprised he'd want to live here."

At that point, Mr. Cliff seemed to remember something, and smiled wryly.

"…He's always trying to make do all by himself. …I mean, sure, there's plenty he's accomplished alone. He's an amazing guy. But sometimes I just wish he'd ask for help more."

"You should just say that to Teacher, then…"

Mr. Cliff smiled with a bit of a lonesome look.

"When you grow up, it gets harder to say how you feel. Especially for his type. So all I can do is try to support him in the shadows. …Well, you're the ones who spend more time with him now. Won't you help him for me, Allen?"

He made a request of me while flipping through the orderly papers on the desk. After a pause, I replied clearly.

"I'll help. I'll help everyone, including Teacher."

Mr. Cliff looked me in the eyes and suddenly smiled.

"Please. …He told me he was going to the library," he said, pointing to the ceiling. I thanked him, and left Teacher's room.

I went up to the second floor and opened the library door. Teacher was asleep on the sofa. His jacket covered him like a makeshift blanket. I quietly approached. I could hear him breathing, so he wasn't dead. Given the sickly pale color of the skin around his eyes and his skinny body, I was uneasy when I saw him with closed eyes. After watching him for a while, he seemed to notice me and slowly opened his eyes.

He looked at me, and spoke slowly, in a darker tone than usual. "…Hm? Ahh… Alice. If you want to play, let's do it tomorrow. I'm sure you're tired too, aren't you? …Good night." Then he closed his eyes and began peacefully breathing again.

"…?"

Looking around, I soon noticed something amiss. There was a closet in the back where there was normally a bookcase. So this was still only the entrance to a World? I softly touched the door. …This would be the last one.

"I'll save them… for sure."

I checked my pocket to be sure the key was still there. I still didn't know what I'd do. But I'd decided what I'd do in worst case. I took another deep breath.

And I opened the door to the final World.

There was a somewhat nostalgic, comfortable smell. The warmth on my skin made me sleepy. But this was not the time to oversleep. I got up and stretched. The unfamiliar room, unlike the one I'd just been in at the facility, was dyed in sepia tones. A large number of beds were laid in rows.

I checked the door, and it wasn't locked. Relieved, I opened it. The smooth hallway had stone walls that made my rhythmical footsteps echo. The architecture gave me the impression of being an old, past building, not something from the present.

There were a number of doors along the walls of the hallway, and at the end of it was another door of a different shape. Would there be another hallway through here? I approached it and turned the knob, but this one was locked. …Now what?

"…Huh? Hey, sister, there's a boy!"

"It's not like boys are a rare… Oh, I haven't seen a blond-haired boy here before."

"Wow, he's tiny! Look, he's a head smaller than me!"

"He looks sleepy. There's plenty of beds, you know. Maybe you should sleep in one?"

While I was stopped by the door, four figures came out of a different room from the one I was in. Figures, as in… they were literally only silhouettes. I could even faintly see through them. From their outlines, I could barely determine characteristics like pigtails and long hair.

"Um… Can this door not open?"

"Hm? Oh yes, it can. Who has the key, the second-oldest sister?"

"That's not right. She did before, but now it's the first-oldest."

The shadows swayed and muttered amongst themselves. I could identify their voices as female, but not being able to determine their expressions made me uneasy.

"We certainly could just give it to you now, but… I'm a little bored. Will you hear my request? If you do, I'll unlock the door to the next hall," a shadow with an outline of long hair told me, her hair swaying. I replied "I'll do what I can," and she pondered, giggling.

“Let’s see… How about a ribbon? Yes, bring me a red ribbon, could you? I always leave it on the table, but I seem to have lost it.”

“A red ribbon? I have one of those.”

The shadow with pigtails rustled around near her waist and pulled out a long ribbon. But it blended together with the shadow, as I couldn’t make out any color on it either.

“Ahh! So you took it again, did you? Sheesh. Give that back!”

“Fine, but not just for free. Let’s see… Say, you there. I’m freezing right now. Could you get me something to warm myself up?”

Something warm… Of course, I wasn’t even wearing a jacket myself, and I had nothing else to give. …Now what?

“Well then, use my legwarmers. …But it would be boring to just give these to you, too. How about you decide what I make him do?”

“Huh?! Why do you always push it on me ‘cause I’m the youngest sister?! This is why I don’t like you guys! Um… Ummm… Okay, uh, make an animal sound! How about a frog?”

The small shadow with pigtails and a cap complained, then made a request of me. I’d never tried imitating an animal before, and to have to do it in front of people…

“…Rrribbit.”

I did the best frog I could on such short notice. The shadows’ swaying came to a halt; they seemed to be staring right at me. …This was pretty embarrassing.

“…My, well, I’ll go with it too. Do a cow next.”

“Me too! I’d like a cat!”

“Dog, then. Dog for me.”

Once one had broken the ice, the other sisters made additional demands. But I couldn’t just stand around here. Putting my shame aside, I responded to all of their requests.

“Ahh, that was fun. You don’t seem very good at that. But you did your best, which is what counts. Now give him the key.”

My throat kind of hurt after doing all those voices. The shadow sisters exchanged the respective things they needed, and finally, one of them opened the door with a click.

“Now you can go through. …Come to think of it, where did that boy go? Isn’t he always reading in a bedroom during the day?”

“Who knows? He’s an elusive one. …And well, you know what happened just the other day. He has a lot to think about, I’m sure.”

Intrigued by the shadowy sisters’ conversation, I stopped myself from going through the door.

“…What kind of boy are you talking about?”

The girls whispered to each other for a few seconds. Eventually, the pigtailed shadow began to speak.

“He’s a boy with black hair and black eyes. He had a twin sister, but just recently, she fell asleep and wouldn’t wake up. He cried a lot when that happened. He’s always been a crybaby, but it felt like he cried a year’s worth. His sister got taken to the hospital, and she’s still sleeping there… But he’s been acting kinda odd since then.”

“Yes, that’s also about the time he started writing that… story, I believe? He’s always just writing, writing away at his desk. …I suppose he has to escape into such things to face it, at his age.”

The sisters got steadily quieter as they continued to whisper. Eventually, I couldn’t hear them at all anymore, so deciding I couldn’t get any more from them, I turned back to the door.

It was pretty cold in the other hallway. Rubbing my arms, I looked out the window next to me. The sky was cloudy, ready to rain at any moment. The trees below had lost all their leaves. It felt the same way as the end of summer. Before I came to the Worlds - that night I first opened my closet in the facility, it was autumn. So the flow of time in this World might have actually matched reality.

I turned away from the window to look down the hallway. Not too far ahead, I saw a figure. I approached, and thankfully, I could make out a clear shape and colors. I only saw his back, but he had black hair, wore a checkered knit vest, and didn’t seem very tall. Once I got close enough, he noticed me and turned.

“…What? Are you lost?”

The boy was about my age, and his characteristics seemed to match the boy the sisters had mentioned. He smiled at me, and his smile seemed a little mature, considering.

“No, I’m just looking for something.”

“I see. Well, so am I. …I’ve searched all over, but I can’t find it. Strange, when I’ve looked so hard for it…”

With a gloomy expression, the boy blinked. He had black eyes which seemed to stare into the distance. …I felt like this wasn’t out first meeting, and I wondered why.

“…Say, do you mind if I come with you?”

“Huh?”

“If I search with someone else, maybe I’ll find something different. …So, please,” he asked kindly, with a smile.

“Sure. Um… what’s your name?”

“Ah…” He made a sour face and fell into thought. Eventually, he looked back at me and blinked.

“…Call me what you like. I hate my name. I won’t give my name, so you don’t have to give yours. …Anyway, let’s go.”

He lightly pushed me on the back to hurry me forward, and it felt cold. I started walking as if to get away from it.

Once I began to walk, the boy got beside me and walked at my pace. On his waist was a keychain with several keys on it, and I noticed something hanging from a string around his neck. But whatever was at the end of it was inside his white shirt, so I couldn’t identify it.

“…Curious about the keys? Well, I’m sure they’re not the keys you’re looking for. … These are all the keys to my doors.”

I looked up at him. “My doors,” he said. Did he, unlike the other children, know about this World?

“…Is this your World?”

“That’s right. …This my second time coming to this dream. It’s a little different from before. But… none of the important parts are any different,” the boy said coldly.

…This was this boy’s World. But the White Rabbit said that I was the sixth to come here. I’d thought that the five who came before me were Letty, Chelsy, Joshua, Stella, and Teacher. And I’d never met this boy before.

After walking a while, the boy pointed to a door and said “Let’s go in here.” I nodded, and

he used one of the keys on the keychain to open the door. Inside, there were many bookcases packed with books. I looked toward the boy, but he seemed to be waiting for me to move.

…What a strange boy.

I took a random book and flipped through it. The cover read “About People.”

“Are you interested in that kind of thing?”, the boy asked in a slightly artificial voice. Not having a good answer for him, I just twisted my neck.

“It’s impossible for anyone to know a person, unless you are them. …The cat told me that.”

“…The cat?”

“Yes. But when someone besides you first looks at you, a new “self” is born, isn’t it? That’s what I think.“

Did he mean the Cheshire Cat? That did sound like something he’d say. But like the Cheshire Cat, the boy’s musings were too complex for me.

”…It’s tricky. I can’t fully understand it. But I’m not bothered by not knowing. People have a bad habit of trying to know things they shouldn’t.“

While the boy ruminated, he pulled out another book from the shelf and turned through it. I put back the book I had and took out another one.

It seemed to be a novel. I’d never read it, or even seen it before. Glancing at the colophon, I noticed the publication date was about twenty years ago. Getting curious, I went and checked the other books. All the books were fairly old; the newest one was published eighteen years ago.

”…What year is it?“

The concept of time in the Worlds was an enigma, but I timidly asked the boy anyway.

“Who knows. There’s a calendar over there.”

The boy pointed to an old calendar on the wall. It showed the date in October, eighteen years ago.

“…How old are you?”

“Hm? …Ah, I don’t know. My teacher might know, having been the one who found us and all.”

“Teacher?”

“Yes, Miss Revis. A woman who works at this orphanage. We were abandoned near this place right after being born. Then she found us. …Child neglect, we heard her say.”

The boy flipped back through the dates on the calendar as if traveling back through his memories.

“…Maybe we should look for her. She might know something. I have other questions for her, too.”

He nodded to himself and showed me the way. The two of us left the room. He stopped in front of the very next door and used a different key to open it. Inside was a person who was only a shadow, similar to the sisters.

“…Huh? Mr. Director, do you know where Miss Revis is?”

“Ah, good day. She left just a moment ago. Perhaps she went home for the night as usual?”

“…I see. Thank you very much… I guess she isn’t here. Hm, this is a little different from before.”

The fact that the boy didn’t expect this showed on his face, and he put a finger to his mouth and thought. Eventually he came to a conclusion, looked up, and sighed.

“For now, we’ll just have to walk around. Let’s go somewhere else.”

The boy tapped my back, and went to walk down the halls again. Not wanting to be left behind, I went after him.

He used yet another key from his waist to open the room next to the shadowy person he called the “director.” Was it okay for him to be opening these doors himself? I started to worry.

“It’s fine. …I’m doing this because I want to.”

With that, he opened the door and went inside. I stopped in surprise that he had answered my question without me asking it. Those who I could remember having such a skill were both very untrustworthy sorts.

We looked around the room, which was again packed with various books. The boy repeatedly took out a book, flipped through it, put it back, got another… again and again, then suddenly clapped a book shut, gave up on it, and approached me. It seemed he hadn’t found anything of note.

“…Huh? A key?”

I noticed something gleaming in the corner of my vision. A small key laid on the desk in the corner. As I reached for it, the boy grabbed my hand.

“Be careful. That lamp there is broken, and it’s hard to see them, but there are shards scattered around it.”

I only noticed once the boy warned me of them. Little sand-like grains reflected the light. The boy got a handkerchief out of his pants pocket, picked the key up with it, and after shaking it several times, put it back in his pocket.

“…Sorry. My hand is cold, isn’t it? I’m sure it’s because I don’t know warmth.”

He bit his lip sadly. Why was he taking responsibility for everything upon himself?

“…Its okay, it’s not that cold. …If I hold it, it’ll get warmer.”

I took the boy’s hand, and he looked surprised and concerned. He blinked many times, then his eyes narrowed slightly.

“…You’re so kind. Now… I realize. Only now. …Much too late.”

With his open hand,, the boy rubbed his eyes.

“Your hands are warm.”

Afterward, we decided to go back to where I first met the boy and rest by the windows.

“It rains a lot around here. Everyone says they hate it, but I prefer rain.”

“Why?”

“Since it hides my tears. When I was little, I cried in the corner among the sound of raindrops.”

“…You cry a lot?”

“…I wanted XXXX. So I XXXXed. …Because the cat told me to XXXX bad people. So I XXXXed them, a lot. But… it was no use. There were only good people around me. No… That’s not it. It was surely no use because I didn’t know how to XXXX. …I wonder if she’d be mad at me, too.”

Some of his words were obscured with static, so I couldn't hear them. He had a serious look, and his shoulders shook. Was XXXX that important?

"Who do you mean?"

"My big sister. When I cried, she'd always say a charm for me. But… she wouldn't wake up. Soon, she never woke up again. …It's my fault. It's… my fault…"

The boy buried his face in his knees and stopped talking. I silently stroked his back. … Come to think of it, that was what Teacher did for us when he was worried about us.

"…I wonder where Teacher is."

The boy shook with surprise. Then he wiped his eyes with his arm repeatedly, stood up, and silently held his hand to me.

"Let's go. …We're almost there."

With that seemingly meaningful remark, the boy showed a mature-looking smile. I took his hand and got up, and he went to the solitary door along the wall. Unlocking it with the key he wrapped in the handkerchief, he opened it and invited me in.

Upon entering, a strong smell of medicine struck my nose. Silhouettes of various sizes were hastily running around and talking.

"…I see. So there's this, too," the boy nodded with understanding as he looked around.

"Let's head for the back without bumping into them. The desk I use is back there."

He pulled my hand. We nearly did crash into the shadows several times, but we somehow made it to the desk in the back corner. Lots of papers were strewn across the desk; it was impossible to tell what anything was.

"…It might be too complicated for you. It's mine, all of it. It's in the past now, but I did all kinds of research. I was praised and got awards, even. …But I've given it up now."

"…You got bored?"

"No… I'm just doing something different. There's the fact I don't like crowded places… But maybe it was because my friend said that white coats don't suit me." The boy smiled as he flipped through and turned over the scattered papers.

"What are you doing now?"

"It's a secret. I decided not to tell people what I really want to do," he answered with a grieving look.

That was when the suspicions I had about this boy became clear. Why I felt like I'd met him before at our first meeting. Not to mention his behavior, tone, and the things he said. …And his oddly mature smile.

"…Teacher?"

I asked the boy, and he looked at me and faintly smiled. His marble-like black eyes reflected my face like mirrors.

"…This way."

He took me by the hand again, leading me to a door in the back of the room. The door didn't seem to be locked, opening easily.

It was dark and hard to see ahead. This way, the boy repeated, pulling me along. I watched my feet so I didn't trip, and we proceeded ahead.

"…"

The boy suddenly stopped. I looked back up toward him. A small door floated in the dark.

"This is where we part. Up ahead is my World. My… present self's World."

The boy took something out, and immediately after, the door clicked open.

"It's open. …Why did it come to this? You're smart, so perhaps you know."

I couldn't be sure of his expression, but his low voice hurt my heart. …Was he crying?

"If you know the answer, tell me… Allen."

The boy spoke my name, which hadn't been said once since entering this World.

I briefly spaced out, and once I snapped out of it, the boy had already vanished. …Where did he go? I looked back at the small door.

"…Teacher," I whispered.

Teacher was up ahead. I had to get back. …With all of them. Saying it to myself aloud, I was about to twist the doorknob when I felt a slight warmth on my palm.

"…Help me."

“…!”

A voice I’d heard before took away my senses. The energy left my body, and my vision went black.

My body was embraced with warmth. Did I know what this was…?

“…Will you stop spacing out?”

A blunt voice spoke from above. Someone poked me awake. In front of me was… not the boy from earlier, but a long-haired girl who greatly resembled him, looking at me sourly.

…Who? I stared at her dimly, and she lightly slapped my cheek.

“…Ow. Who are you?”, I asked, stroking my cheek, and the girl seemed even more displeased.

“You don’t know, huh? Give me a second.” The girl cleared her throat and took a few deep breaths.

“…There was a white house on the corner of a street. In this house lived a mother, a father… and a boy who loved books.”

The tone was the same as the voice I had heard repeatedly in the Worlds. A kind voice that warmed my heart. Indeed, it was her voice I’d heard many a time in my dreams.

“You’ve realized now? Good, good. …You’re such a crybaby, even in your dreams. You smell like tears. …Exactly like him.”

“…Why did you talk to me?”

“Hm? Well… Because you hadn’t renounced anything yet. …You’re still trying hard to get it back. That’s why I was nosy.”

The girl approached and grabbed my hand. Her warmth tickled my palm.

“I’m a bit lost. And I can’t see very well anymore. …Would you guide me? Don’t worry, you’re able to see the way. Just go down that path.”

The girl pointed in a direction with empty eyes. There was a straight brick road of reddish-brown. Holding her hand, I walked along it, careful that she didn’t trip.

“The rabbit said that six people had come to this World. Er… Adding you, I guess it’s actually seven.”

“Fiona. …I think that was my name. Yes, that sounds right. I have no soul anymore. Now… it’s just like little teeny shards he’s gathered together.”

“…Do you mean our teacher?”

“Yes, the one you call Teacher. He’s my brother, my only relative. He lets his hair grow so long, even though I’m sure he learned how to cut it a long time ago. Honestly, it’s so wimpy and pathetic of him to not let go. He’s not going to get anywhere dragging around all that weight! He’s an idiot, he is. Stupid, stupid moron!! UGH!!!”

Fiona started rambling fiercely. In appearance, she resembled the young Teacher I’d seen earlier, but her personality didn’t seem very similar at all. I continued forward as she spoke, and finally came to a door. It wasn’t locked, so we went through.

As soon as the door was open, I smelled a pleasant aroma. The smell of paper and new books. It was a lot like the library I always went to. Though it was much smaller than any libraries I knew, and had fewer books.

“Ah, it smells like books. Hey, Crybaby. Do you see a stain on the right side of the back wall?”

…Was she calling me Crybaby? Feeling a little uneasy, I checked where she told me. Like Fiona said, there was a large stain on the wall that stood out. I told her about it.

“Then maybe this is that library we used to go to. It was a small one, but we loved it. … But it was torn down ages ago. To think it would stick around like this.”

Fiona let go of my hand and walked around by herself. Her walking was unsteady, so I tried to support her, but she groaned “I’m fine” and pushed me away.

“Please. I’ve come here a lot, you know. …Could this be it? The story about dreams he wrote.”

She took a white book out of the bookcase in front of her. It said “Nightmare” on the cover, with an unfamiliar name written underneath.

“He told me he’d come here before, to this dream.”

“Dream? …Hah, he would say that, wouldn’t he. If it really were a dream, his heart wouldn’t hurt so. Well… Maybe this place is more like what’d you call heaven or hell,” she muttered, stroking the book’s cover adoringly.

“…? But I’m not dead yet.”

“Yes, so maybe it’s a more in-between place than that. …There must a simple reason why

you’ve come here. Probably because you’ve lost XXXX.”

…XXXX. The word was obscured with static again.

“The cat said he stole just one thing from me. …Did he mean XXXX?”

“Cat? You mean the one with the smarmy laugh? …Did you believe everything that cat said?”, she asked rudely. “The words of a demon who treats people’s sorrows as his feasts?”

Certainly I wouldn’t believe everything out of his mouth. But there was nothing else here to rely on, so I had little choice. I reluctantly nodded.

“Hm. How could you believe something you’ve never seen or experienced? …Maybe you can believe because you have no clue. Hah, how strange.”

Fiona smiled with pity and put the white book back.

“Those demons don’t have faces or names. That means they don’t have responsibility, either. You must be awfully honest to trust them. …Liars are everywhere. The world can hardly contain them all. And gullible people… also everywhere.”

With a sad look, Fiona embraced my hands in her warmth again.

“But it’s only the gullible ones who get hurt. Maybe God’s just a sadist.”

Her black eyes looked into the distance. But they weren’t like Teacher’s glass marbles. She, despite claiming to not have a soul, had much more human-like eyes.

“Just kidding. Ah, I love the smell of books. Never get tired of it.”

I let go of Fiona’s hand, and she stumbled around the room again. Though keeping my distance, I watched her carefully.

Fiona ran her finger horizontally along the books in another bookcase. She took out the thickest book and showed the cover to me.

“What does the cover say?”, she asked, twisting her neck.

“Um… Name Encyclopedia?” I read the title, and she hummed curiously as she analyzed its thickness.

“And it’s so thick. There are just that many names, are there…? Heehee. Apparently my name means “bright.” My teacher gave it to me.

“Your teacher? Miss Revis?”

“That’s right. Our beautiful teacher, with long brown hair, who’s a little scary when she’s angry, but very kind. Though, before I fell asleep, she was saying that after she got married, she’d quit in a few years. She seemed to want to have a child, so we all celebrated. She looked very happy, telling us she hoped to have a girl, and how she wanted to name her Chelsy.”

“Chelsy…”

So Chelsy’s mother was Fiona and Teacher’s teacher… Meaning the sender of those letters I found in Chelsy’s World was most likely our teacher. I hadn’t expected there to be such a connection.

“Miss Revis always put her all into coming up with names. She told us she really agonized over ours, too.”

“…What’s Teacher’s… your brother’s name?”

“…David. It means “recipient of XXXX.”“

…XXXX. I tried to echo her words, but I just couldn’t do away with the static.

“Yes, XXXX. But he said the name didn’t suit him, because he was wasn’t someone who was XXXXed. He hated to use that name. But… he knows XXXX. He was certainly XXXXed. By me, our teacher, the director, his new friend. And now, by all of you.”

“…Really?”

“Yes. But he didn’t realize that it was XXXX.”

“What… is XXXX?”

“…Oh? Why, XXXX is all around us. Look, there’s XXXX here, and XXXX over there. Even talking to you now is a show of my XXXX for you, Crybaby. When you realize that, that’s when you can have XXXX for yourself. …And if you don’t notice? Then it’s no different from a pebble on the ground. Saying you don’t know it is just an excuse.”

After kindly explaining, Fiona walked over to another bookshelf and repeated her searching action. I wondered, what was she looking for? When I approached, she jumped, and her finger stopped.

“…Hey, what color is this?”, she asked me seriously, taking a small notebook out of the bookcase.

“White. It’s completely white.”

“…And inside?”

With a curious look, she flipped the pages to show me. Absolutely nothing was written.

“Blank pages. They’re all blank.”

“So it’s blank. …It’s always been blank ever since then,” she remarked with disappointment. Her gloomy look was the spitting image of Teacher. I asked if she was okay.

“No, it’s okay. I just wanted to check. There’s a door there. It’s unlocked, so… Let’s go to the other side.”

Fiona grabbed my hand and poked me in the shoulder. There was a door between the bookcases. I opened it.

It was eerily silent through the door, and there seemed to be only darkness up ahead. The faint warm wind and sound of gravel below my feet told me that we were outside.

Watching her carefully and making sure not to trip myself, I slowly headed forward. Our footsteps echoed in the quiet area.

After a while, we arrived at a large lake. There was a big swirl in the water, like someone had mixed white paint into it. There seemed to be no going any further.

“…Looks like we’re here.”

She stood beside me and looked into the lake. Her body was staggering, so I fidgeted with worry that she’d fall in.

“This is a sky of souls. This is where they’re reborn. Both souls eaten by demons and souls that lose their power can be reborn. …But I’m too weighed down to fly. So I can’t.”

“…You can’t?”

“Yes,” she replied, staring into the rippling water. “You know it’s impossible to get a crumpled paper back to being creaseless. I’m sure even he’s noticed that. But he depends on me, clings to me, and is hurt. And I’ve lost my soul, lost my sparkle. I can’t guide him anymore. Even if I’m his sister.”

Fiona closed her eyes with a self-deprecating smile.

“You… You should grow to be people who can break away. …Renouncing facing oneself. Renouncing acknowledgment. Renouncing improving oneself. Renouncing attachment to life. And he renounced taking notice of anything around him. What you’re about to see is the fate of a person who ends up that way.”

“But I…”

“You haven’t renounced anything yet. You haven’t given up. You have to always look at the road ahead. There’s no point in looking behind.”

She turned to me and held my hand in hers. The warmth spread through my body.

“This is the end. …My last light.”

“…!”

Warm sunlight. Mom’s soft voice. Dad’s big hands stroking me gently. Slightly burnt bacon with sunny-side up eggs. Newly-made friends in a new place. Teacher, who was at times unreliable, but always extremely concerned for us. The hands that held mine when I hurt. This… warmth.

“I remember…”

A hole inside me was filled at once. My heart which had shrunk so much in this World couldn’t hold it all, and it began to pour out my eyes. I stayed still, feeling that which filled me.

“…Oh, you’re crying again. Hah, you really are a crybaby. There there, there there, there, there… It’s okay.”

Fiona held my hand tight and recited a charm. My heart was strangely eased as I listened to it. Her fingers wiped away the liquid pouring from my eyes.

“It’s up to you to change the ending of the story. And now that you have it back, I’m sure you’ll be fine. …Good night, Crybaby.”

I woke up collapsed in front of the door. I got up and looked around. The thing I’d gotten back seemed to be producing warmth near my heart.

I had to go. My body moved before I could think. I turned the knob and threw the door open. The room looked like a cramped storeroom.

My eyes stopped on a white-covered book stuck between thick books on a bookshelf. Pulling it out, the cover and back were both blank, with no title or anything. Flipping through, I saw dates and diary entries.

I bought a house. Well, but it was formerly a facility. It's much too big for me; I can see myself getting lost easily. I'm indebted to Cliff once again. I should really thank him later.

That was the first page. The next few pages were all idle thoughts, but starting at one of the pages, things took a turn.

Today I met a girl. A few days ago, she was found near a house that burned down, and seems to be the daughter. She insists there's someone other than her. She seems to have another personality. So I gave her double the furniture and such. I wasn't sure what to do, but at any rate, I've finally found a research subject. She's now in my care. No symptoms at the moment.

No symptoms at the moment, it said at the end. And it mentioned subjects for research.

I met a second girl. I received a letter three days ago that had all the particulars. Perhaps because of what she's been through, she's much less cheery. She's reluctant to talk with me. She enjoyed talking with the other girl, albeit not for very long. It may be slow, but I'll try to get her talking with me. No symptoms at the moment.

The third. I met a boy. I was surprised, but given his mother, I decided to take him in. He talks plenty, but he's… illogical. He was a little awkward with the two girls, but they're playing together a few days later. Today he put about three frogs on my head. He's a bit too mischievous. No symptoms at the moment.

I met the fourth, a girl. She walked from the town deep in the woods. I talked with her, and she told me all the townspeople had been wiped out. So surely she did have a resistance to it? I'm a little interested, but it's unrelated to what I'm doing now. She doesn't want to talk about it much, either. It's hard to talk with her. She doesn't talk with the others, just playing piano in her room. No symptoms at the moment.

It was all written very similarly. Between these pages were also detailed notes about behavior and physical changes in the children. But numerous pages were torn out, so I couldn't get the full picture.

All the children have the potential to break out, but still no symptoms. But are there even symptoms? How did it go back then? I'm getting a headache. I'll stop for now.

The letters on that page were squiggly like worms, but I managed to read them. Several pages after that were ripped out too, and the next page was dated nearly a year after the previous entry.

I met a fifth child. He was outside when the incident happened. They say the shock caused memory loss. At a glance, I was surprised. It's just a hunch, but he must be on the verge. I'll watch him very carefully.

…Was I the fifth child?

Two seasons have passed since then. What have I been doing? I feel like my chest is burning. I see the scene in my mind again. This must mean… Yes. Very soon. It must be over soon. My head hurts. I'm sorry, Fiona.

That was the last page. Half the pages had been crudely torn out. I had guessed it was Teacher's diary from the writing and content, but the "Fiona" at the end solidified it.

"Count your sins!"

Suddenly, laughter echoed behind me. I quickly turned to find the Cheshire Cat.

"Judgement! Guilty! Sentenced to bed! Sweet Dreams for life! Mweeheeheehee!"

As always, he ridiculed me with a grating voice. Once I took notice of him, he spread his jagged smile all the way.

"Thought I'd come talk 'bout that pact business I mentioned before."

"…No thanks. I don't want anything to do with you. Now move it."

"No need to be in such a rush! The flow of time in this World's agonizingly slow, y'know. And hey, just between you and me, this deal might be beneficial for ya."

The Cheshire Cat tried to stop me from simply passing him by. He really didn't want to let me through. I got more and more irritated. Maybe it would be faster to listen to him than stare him down.

"You got it! I can't hate you smart brats. I told you before, yeah? Let's go through the ways to link the World with the world. One of them's to use that key you're holding and make a soul into a door. …After you talked with 'im, and knew not everybody could go back, you really were thinking of stabbin' yourself for the others, weren'tcha?"

I was startled to hear him see through me and say it out loud. …I was the one who opened the door to this World, after all. It was surely all my fault, for having created this dream and making it all end up this way. So the most evil person… was me.

“So what if I told you everyone could go back? …What’d you do?”

“…Huh?”

…Everyone could go back to our world?

“Yep! There’s another way to link the worlds. A pact with a demon. We demons eat souls to live. Even from a dog or a frog - doesn’t matter, a soul’s a soul. But people taste best, and they’re the most filling. …Especially souls broken by despair and agony.”

“So then, me and everyone else…”

“Kids don’t know much stuff. If you know what to take, it’s easy to break ‘em. …‘Course, I didn’t lay a finger on the black-haired one. Just happened to come across her. Adults are no good, though. They’re too hard ‘cause of all that dirty knowledge.”

They were tormenting me just so I would be a better meal for them? And the others, too. …My irritation changed into anger. This guy was a demon, all right.

“That’s why we mainly dine by luring kids into this World. Though… this time, it was him who made this Dream, this World. Thought he would’ve known better since he’d come here before. But I guess he didn’t change one bit! Don’tcha think that’s hilarious?”

I glared at the Cheshire Cat wondering how to use this anger, but the statement that “he” made the dream caught my attention.

“…Teacher made this Dream? Not me?”

“Yeah, that’s right. You guys were on the right track, but not agonized enough to open the door just yet. He’s the one who linked to the World this time ‘round!”

The Cat put a hand to his mouth and snickered. Watching him dumbfounded, I felt the temperature dropping in my head.

“What? You eat cows and birds’ souls to live longer. Couple of differences, but people and demons aren’t different at all at their roots. Same as you, we gotta eat or we die. Only thing is, there’s a way for us to keep living without having to eat.”

Cheshire held a black claw up in front of me.

“And that’s a pact with a demon. In layman’s terms, your soul and mine get mixed. Demons can go to worlds and Worlds alike. So that’s a good reason to wanna have a body,

too. I could possess peeps without any pacting, but my time'd be limited and all that jazz."

…Mix our souls? He was asking me to merge souls with him?

"Exactly right. Since you're empty, I can completely take over your body… You don't get a chance this good every day! You'll get the power to go between Worlds for yourself. Won't even have to start eating souls or nothin'. Up to you whether you wanna believe me. Think about it, alright? Call whenever you wanna pact! I'll smell ya!"

Cheshire turned and became part of the darkness. His eerie laughter reverberated many times off the walls of the small room. I stood there, processing it. How much could I believe?

More importantly, I needed to see Teacher as soon as possible. I shook my head to clear the mess building up in it. Then I approached the last door at the back of the storeroom and turned the knob.

As I opened the door, I smelled the same smell of books as when I was with Fiona. There was a bit of dustiness mixed in, and it was dark inside. I didn't initially notice among the darkness, but there was a figure in the back of the room.

Before approaching it, I tightly grabbed the key to our world hidden in my pocket in my hands. The key touched a metal part on my suspenders, making a small clinking sound.

"Who's there?"

The shadow turned around and approached, and I backed away. As I expected, it was Teacher.

"If you're here, then… No, the cat can't be trusted. …You really are proficient at breaking promises. It's quite troubling."

Finally, he got close enough for me to see his face. His skin was more pale than usual, and his eyes were jet black.

"…The dreaming illness. Did you lock us up there to research that illness?"

Teacher looked concerned by my blunt question. But he soon returned to neutral.

"Yes, that's right. Nightmare Syndrome… As an avid reader, I'm sure you've heard of it at least once. The cause is said to be unknown, but I believe it emerges in children who lose something, plunging their hearts into darkness."

Teacher crept toward me as he spoke. He seemed significantly different from our usual kind Teacher.

“On the surface, I took in hurt children with nowhere to go, helped them, and let them live with me. …But secretly, I observed and studied them as children who might acquire the sickness. That is what I was hiding from you there.”

“Teacher, do you… not care about us?”

“…Correct,” he answered after a pause. “My goal is to research this illness and destroy this dream. …You were only…”

He fell silent. His gaze dropped to my waist, and his eyes narrowed.

“…Is that a World key in your hands? Would you give that to me?”

Teacher extended a hand to me, smiling coldly. I brought the World key out from behind my back… and thrust it toward myself.

A few drops of red liquid fell off my hand. But the sharp blade wasn’t pierced into my body; it had stopped in midair. Teacher was firmly holding the edge of the key. The drops coming out of his hand ran along the blade toward mine, dripping off it there.

“…You’re a liar too, Teacher,” I said to him as he looked on with worry. I knew my face was turning pale.

“You should’ve been able to come here right away. …My mom and dad are dead. If you’d told me that, maybe it would make a door to the World just like yours. But Teacher… you always said everything was fine. You cared about me, about us. You let us push you around. Isn’t that… isn’t even what you just did completely contrary to what you say your goal is?”

Everything Teacher had done for us was undoubtedly for us. I just wouldn’t believe that was all a lie.

Teacher didn’t speak. I went on slowly, sure that he could hear me.

“What that made me feel… was **love**.”

Teacher’s eyes widened at the word I spoke. As he seemed to recall something, he scratched his head.

“…No. I mean, I don’t know how to **love**. It was my lack of **love** that made me open this door back when I was young. …After I lost someone precious to me here, it became all I could think about. And so, still without **love**, I linked us to this World once again.” Teacher bit his lip.

“…Fiona told me. You do have **love**. But if you don’t notice it’s **love**, it’s no more than a pebble.”

“Fiona…?” Teacher stared at me childishly, his mouth agape. A completely different expression from the boy I met.

I let go of the blade in my hand, and Teacher gradually let go too, until finally, it slipped away and clattered to the ground.

I held Teacher’s bloodstained hand in my hands. Though it was big enough that it wouldn’t quite fit.

“This is… definitely my **love** for you, Mr. David.”

I smiled. Teacher’s body stiffened, and he blinked repeatedly. His lips quivered, but finally, his usual soft smile came out.

“…How many years has it been since I was called that name? Though it feels so different from how it did then. …Hahah… I’m really not very smart, am I. It was so close all this time.”

Teacher squeezed my hands back. I felt a slight warmth.

“…Your hands are warm.”

He quietly lowered his ruffled head. Not letting go of his hand, I kneeled down to get on level with Teacher. Just then, I saw a clear drop fall from his cheek.

“I’ll give you this.”

Teacher untied the string around his neck. He handed the swaying golden locket to me.

“What you told me you wanted… I couldn’t give to you then.”

I took the locket in my hands. In that brief instant, Teacher quickly reached in another direction.

…The world key!

I reached out as I realized his intent, but it was too late. He grabbed the world key in one hand and forcefully plunged it into his gut. Deep, deep in. His white shirt was stained red, and the same color poured out of his mouth.

“…I’m the one who made this World. So I have to end it. I hid too much of my weakness. Before I knew it, I was drowning in more than I could manage.”

He took his hand off his stomach and leaned on the back wall.

“As you said, I couldn’t take the last step. …Soon enough, my door opened. I intended to come alone. And I asked that cat not to open the doors of anyone but me. But instead, the rest of you were taken in, making a much larger World.”

Teacher slouched over and coughed intensely. He scowled at the liquid scattered on his hand.

“Don’t worry. I am an adult, allegedly. They won’t eat me. …I researched long, but I guess it was all for naught. I just left you with many bad memories. …Don’t be like me, Allen.”

He looked up, and with a small smile, brushed my cheek.

A slight bit of warmth had come back to his hand. His eyes, losing all their light, began to close.

“Don’t cry, now. There, there, there, there, there there… It’s okay. …My friend’s phone number is in that locket too. Call him once you get back, would you? You shouldn’t even have to say a word. And, please… forget about me.”

“Mr. David…”

He smiled again at me saying his name.

“Then no one will have to come here again. …I should have known better. I… just didn’t want to forget.”

Teacher’s eyes shut all the way, and the energy left his body. He fell toward me, and I managed to hold his body.

The darkness around us took the shape of many arms, surrounding Teacher. I tried pulling away the shadowy appendages, but my hands passed through like it was air; I couldn’t stop him from going into the darkness.

Soon, even his hand on my cheek was sucked inside.

“Good night, Allen. …I’m sorry.”

Teacher gave me one last smile full of warmth.

2

…Deep in my ears, there were many metallic sounds overlapping each other. My body felt

weightless, like I was thrown into zero-gravity. My eyelids were heavy, and felt sewn shut; I couldn't open them. The same sensation as when my soul was taken to this World.

My soul was being pulled back to my own world.

Soon, my senses were completely swallowed up.

Bad people should be XXXXed. Then everyone will be happy.
That's what the cat said. Why would XXXXing them do that?
And did the cat really say it? I don't even know that for sure.
Just XXXX them. Ah, I'm sleepy. Good night.

Bugs flew all around me. I walked along the ground.
A chair talked. I was surprised. A cat watched and laughed like a fool.
But I don't know which of us is strange.
Is it me? Or is it this World?
Oh, I just don't know. …I don't know anything.

The ant told me that the frog is bad.
The frog told me that the cat is bad.
The cat told me, no, the rabbit is the worst of them all.
So I XXXXed them.

When I came to, it was my usual world.
She's… still sleeping today.
I XXXXed lots of people. But I was never XXXXed.
Why is that? Ah, do I have to XXXX more?
But there's no bad people left. There's only good people around me.
The cat says to only XXXX bad people.
Which is right? I don't know. I don't know a thing.
I just keep trying to XXXX people so I can be XXXXed.

Why wasn't I XXXXed?
I thought I could XXXX then, but I simply wasn't able to do it.
Because I didn't know how to XXXX.
What will I do now? I've lost everything.
I have nothing. Oh, I'm so sleepy.
…XXXX me.

Someone, please… XXXX me.

Alice mare - Chapter 7

Final Chapter: Good Morning

1

When I woke up, I was in my room in the facility, completely unchanged from the norm.

My pajamas were soaked with sweat and clung to my skin. I felt like I'd had a very long nightmare. I lifted my hazy head and touched my forehead. I thought I felt something sticky like blood, but when I took my hand away in surprise, I saw nothing there.

…Was it really a dream?

I timidly approached the closet and swung the door open. But my soul was not sucked in; I just saw my clothes hanging inside. I heard no rabbit or cat. It was a normal, unremarkable dresser.

Relieved, I changed out of my pajamas. I checked the clock. It was past twelve. Was it afternoon, or midnight?

The hallway outside was very bright. The air felt a little warm. It looked like noon to me.

…What about the other children?

Suddenly worried, I knocked on Letty's door beside mine and opened up. Letty was sleepily sitting on bed in frilly pajamas.

"Oh… Allen? I had a really, really scary dream. …It was really sad, and painful. Are you okay, Allen? You look sad…"

Surprised, I touched my cheeks. Indeed, it did ache a little around my eyes. Even though I thought I'd only cried in a dream…

"…Yeah, I'm fine. You don't look so good, so maybe you should rest some more. It's only

noon.”

After expressing some concern for Letty, I left the room. I checked on Chelsy, Joshua, and Stella, but they were similarly sleepy and dazed. Then… Teacher.

I went to Teacher’s room and knocked. I didn’t hear the voice I always did. I knocked harder to the same result. As I twisted the knob, my heartbeat got louder. A prickling pain strangled my chest.

I forced my heavy body to open the door. Teacher was asleep in bed. It felt like a rare occasion to see him asleep in his own bed. Maybe that was the first thought to come to mind because I didn’t want to face the reality.

“…Teacher?”, I called as I approached. But he showed no reaction. His face was pale, and he gave a more sickly impression than usual. Getting uneasy, I put my hand on his chest. It slowly moved up and down.

…He was alive.

“Teacher.”

I called for him again, but he didn’t respond. I held his hand sticking out of the sheets in my little hands.

“…Good night, Teacher.”

I let go. I found myself searching my pocket, and noticed something hard and thin in my usually-empty pockets. I pulled it out - the golden locket Teacher always wore. Teacher had given it to me in that World. So those were real occurrences, not a dream.

Holding the locket, I suppressed my welling feelings. Remembering everything, my chest tightened, and I had trouble breathing. Pushing through it, I opened the locket to find a photo and a note.

The photo showed a boy and a girl with similar faces. …The young Teacher I met in that World, and his sister Fiona. The note had a phone number and the name “Cliff,” as Teacher had said.

I rubbed my eyes with my worn-out arms and steadied my breathing. There there, there there, there, there… I repeated in my mind.

…I had to call him. Teacher told me to.

I remembered there was a phone in the entrance hall. I left Teacher’s side to leave the room.

Finding the phone, I picked up the receiver and put it to my ear. An artificial sound echoed. Good, it was connected.

I carefully dialed the number while looking at the note so I wouldn't get it wrong. After a few dial tones, a familiar voice came through.

"…Yes? Hello? Huh, it's not often you're the one calling me. If you're calling to ask for help cleaning or something, that's gonna be a no."

Mr. Cliff responded in his usual cheerful voice. He seemed to think Teacher was calling.

"…Mr. Cliff."

"…Is that Allen I hear?" Once I spoke, his bright tone lowered drastically.

"Ah, I see…" Mr. Cliff understood the situation. "You don't need to say anything. He's told me what would happen for it to come to this."

After a short pause, he continued in a pained voice I'd never heard from Mr. Cliff before. "Get your things packed. And tell the other children to. …I'd appreciate if you could do his, too. It'll take me a while to get there, so please. …Give me some time to think, okay?"

I said nothing more except "Okay," then gently hung up.

Once the receiver was placed back, I lost all energy and collapsed on the spot. An abnormal powerlessness ate at my body.

What should we do now? What would happen?

I had decided what I wanted to do. But…

"…Keep what you really want a secret."

I put my hand on the wall and stood up. I had to pack. So I walked back to my room.

Warm sunlight came in through the windows. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and peaceful chirping tickled my ears.

A long time had passed. Joshua and Chelsy had recuperated and returned home to their families. They seemed to be on good terms with their parents again.

Letty, Stella, and I were staying at Mr. Cliff's house. He was at times at a loss with our peculiarities, but he was helping us go to school. I was working hard to repay him as soon

as I could. I'd recently gotten a part-time job.

"Hey, Allen, what're you doing?"

While I was deep in thought, a young man with long silver hair lept up onto my shoulders. It caught me off-guard; there was no way I could hold him.

"Stop it, Joshua. You've gotten stronger lately, so that really hurts."

"Yeah? I bet you'd get a little stronger if you played basketball, Allen! You're always either reading or folding paper planes, that's why you're so scrawny."

Joshua grabbed my arm and swung it. Shaking his hand off, I sighed.

"Oh, Allen, Joshua. I haven't seen you for a while."

A woman with brown braids in a distinctive red and white outfit came running from the end of the white hallway. But she nearly tripped on the way, and a friendly-faced woman with white hair and reddish-purple highlights managed to stop her.

"No need to rush, Chelsy, they're not going anywhere! Oh, Allen, Joshua, good morning! …Huh? I mean, it's already noon, so… Good day?"

Letty pondered as she lifted Chelsy up. Behind them, an eye-catching woman with long black hair approached with a dumbfounded look.

"…This is a hospital. You should be quiet," Stella scolded. The two looked at each other wryly.

"Well, let's go," I said to the others, then slid open the nearby door.

Teacher was taken to this hospital where he and I first met. He was still sleeping, still breathing. His peaceful expression hadn't changed all this time.

"Teacher, I brought one again today."

Joshua took a little paper plane out of the dark red backpack he was wearing, and put it on Teacher's blanket. Letty, Chelsy, and Stella all took out their own and did the same, piling them higher.

"In a practice game the other day, I nailed a throw in a real bad situation, and everybody went wild! It was super embarrassing when I tripped and twisted my ankle after that, though."

"…You used to be the one who made us fall over. Surprising us with frogs, and worms…"

“Oh, er… s-sorry about that, Chelsy. Heck, that squishy feeling’s so weird, even I don’t wanna touch ‘em anymore!”

Joshua shivered with disgust, but had his usual mischievous smile. Chelsy next to him had a gentle smile, too.

“Teacher, mom’s… gotten a lot better,” she said, grabbing and letting go of the sleeves on her one-piece. Her faintly red cheeks hadn’t changed since she was young. “Maybe it’s because dad started taking more days off to help look after her. She says when she’s fully recovered, she wants to be a teacher again. …I want to be a teacher myself someday, like you and mom.”

“Letty, Stella, you got anything?”, Joshua asked, putting his hands behind his head. “Better say it soon, who knows when you’ll get to visit again.”

Letty twisted her neck and thought, then her face lit up and she spoke with glittering eyes. “…Oh! The other day, I went with Chelsy and Stella to a newly-opened sweets shop and had cake! It had fluffy cream, and bittersweet strawberries, and it was really good!”

Lately, the girls had been going out periodically to eat or go shopping.

“Huh? You went there? Nice! It’s not easy for a guy to go there alone. Next time, can you take me along? …I wanna have some recommendations for when Teacher wakes up.”

“…All right.”

Stella acknowledged Joshua’s request. Just like that, the room was silent. Joshua suddenly looked back at me with realization.

“Allen, what’ve you been up to? Report in!”

“Um… I like that TV series they show on Thursday nights, so the other day, I bought the book it’s based on. And then the book next to it had a really pretty cover, so I bought that one too. Then I also bought a book I’d wanted before, but was sold out at the time, and…”

“Agh, enough! Enough! No more about anything printed! It’s seriously always books with you, Allen! You’re gonna turn into a real live bookworm someday!”

“…And you’ve been talking about nothing but that basketball club of yours, Joshua. Maybe someday you’ll turn into a ball?”, I joked. We looked at each other and laughed.

We met at Teacher’s hospital room occasionally when our schedules aligned, bringing letters to Teacher in the form of paper planes.

We knew they wouldn't be delivered to him there or anything, that it was just for consolation. But just getting those who lived in that facility to meet face to face blew away plenty of my hesitation and pain.

"…Oh yeah, the desk is getting full of paper planes now. We can't throw them away… So what should we do?"

"I'll sort them out. I don't have any real plans today, and sometimes they get put in roughly…"

"Really? …Thanks, Allen. I'm worried about mom and dad, too…"

Chelsy smiled at me, her cheeks getting a little redder. For some reason, Joshua was fidgeting behind her. Everyone said some parting words to Teacher, got their bags, and left the room. Stella, who left last, suddenly stopped on her way out and turned to me.

"Allen. …You've really come to resemble Teacher."

"…You think so? What's this all of a sudden?"

"…No. I won't say anything. You decided it, after all."

Stella's clean black hair swayed as she left the room. Her all-knowing remarks would always give me chills.

Once everyone was gone, I sat on a nearby stool.

"…Spring has come again. I like it. It's nice and warm."

I naturally wasn't expecting a reply, but I spoke to Teacher regardless.

"Letty's the same as ever. Always eager to play. I've stopped seeing Rick anymore. It's a little sad, but… I'm sure it's for the best. Chelsy seems to have reconciled with her dad. She's very good at cooking. And she's slowly starting to talk to people, even people she doesn't know. …Oh yeah, Joshua told me he found someone he likes. That surprised me. He joined a basketball club, and I feel like he's gotten even more mischievous since. Studying's still not his forte, like always. Stella's always looking weary of our antics, but she seems to enjoy this life well enough. …Mr. Cliff and the others are all very nice people."

After that, I took a breath, and steadied my wavering determination. It had been eight years. I kept it secret from the others, even consulting the research Teacher left. But surely, it seemed, an ordinary person couldn't do anything when it came to the Worlds. As such, this was the answer I'd come to.

"…There's no way we could forget. Mr. David, you're the only one we could call our

Teacher. If it weren't you… There'd be no point."

…There was a lot I still wanted him to teach me. And I hadn't given him back what he gave me. I cast my eyes down and bit my lip.

"We'll save you. We absolutely will. There's honestly a very low chance of success. Everything may not go well. But I'm sure this is best."

I slowly stood up, and spoke without turning around.

"…You've been watching, haven't you?"

There was the sound of running water. My heartbeat felt faster than usual.

The emptiness and sense of loss, like trying to catch a cloud - I no longer felt it. I had regained everything. Thus, only one means remained to connect back to that World.

…I wouldn't regret it. A normal person wouldn't be able to do anything. So then…

I took a deep breath and looked at the person in front of me.

Taller than I was then, slightly longer blond hair. And… gold eyes.

Certainly, this person in the mirror was me. I twisted the knob to stop the faucet, and the sound stopped with a squeak.

There there, there there, there, there… It's okay.

I recited that charm to myself. I left the bathroom and hurried back to Teacher's hospital room.

When I opened the door, Teacher, who had lied sleeping for eight years, now had his eyes open wide, staring at his palms, feeling his body.

Seeing Teacher moving after so long brought me all kinds of emotions. But these temporarily stopped deep in my chest, and I just smiled as I spoke.

"Mr. David."

Teacher looked startled, and turned his pale face to me.

…Why?

"…Good morning, Teacher."

Why did his eyes look so sad?

2

People sure are funny, huh.

Tell ‘em not to do something, and they do it without hesitation. Doin’ whatever it takes to do what they think is “right.” Regardless of how much you can’t believe anything another guy says, they got no problem clinging to the fuzziest little thing. They think their selfish acts’ll make people happy.

“I’ll give you my soul, as long as you return Teacher’s soul here once the door is open.”

For somebody who said he had nothin’, you’ve got a student with a lotta respect for his Teach.

I wonder what kind of story you’ll be showin’ me now?

I’ll even lend you a hand. You better not bore me, now.

Mweeheeheeheeeee!

Afterword

I’m △ (mi) ○ (wa) □ (shi) × (ba) - Miwashiba. I’m writing that out here so that no mysteries remain. In this novelization, I struggled with the publisher to clear up all of the game’s mysteries, but whether I actually cleared them all up? That is the mystery, even for me.

When I was in middle school, I saw Let’s Plays of free games on a certain video site and thought, I want to make one of these too!, which was the birth of the original Alice mare. But I was unfamiliar with the software at the time and gave up.

A few years later, however, I wanted to tackle game creation again, so I went fishing through my old files, adding things until it was completed. It was played by far more people than I expected, and I'm seriously surprised it got to the point of this novelization.

My dream for the future is to be an artist!, I've boasted since childhood, but I couldn't have had the faintest inkling that I'd be writing a novel someday. To be honest, it isn't my first time producing a novel, but that's a past I'd rather not discuss, so let's just put that aside. Instead, I think I'll discuss an influence in the creation of the original game.

I think it was when I was ten. My beloved great-grandmother passed away, and for the first time I felt the great loneliness and fear that comes with someone close to you dying. That night, I sobbed and folded countless paper cranes, when my grandfather came along and kindly asked, "Why are you folding cranes?"

I replied, "I'm folding lots of them so they can carry great-grandma back home!" Grandpa stroked my face and told me, "You don't fold cranes to carry great-grandma home, you fold them to carry her up to heaven."

After my grandfather said those words to me, as well as "See 'em off with a smile, or they won't go to heaven," I became able to see the people dear to me off with a smile. My grandfather has also passed away now, and my grandma sometimes speaks of him with sad looks.

How old they'd be if they were still alive, how you wish you'd been more like this to them… In Japanese, we have the proverb "counting the years of dead children" to mean "crying over spilt milk." Because indeed, we can't interfere with the dead or the past.

Regret for the dead just weighs both parties down, someone told me years later: the living can't move forward, and the dead can't go to the afterlife. That's been burned into my brain ever since. My grandmother counts grandfather's age on her fingers ever year, and it worries me every time.

This is a story of people trapped by regret too, so to speak. But I'm certain I'll never make another story so dark. Most importantly, I can't even get myself excited. I like a happy ending.

Lastly, to the publisher, the designer, the people who played the game, and the people whose first experience with it is this book, you have my thanks. I'm indebted to so many of you for this wonderful opportunity. Thank you very much!

- △○□× (Miwashiba)

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